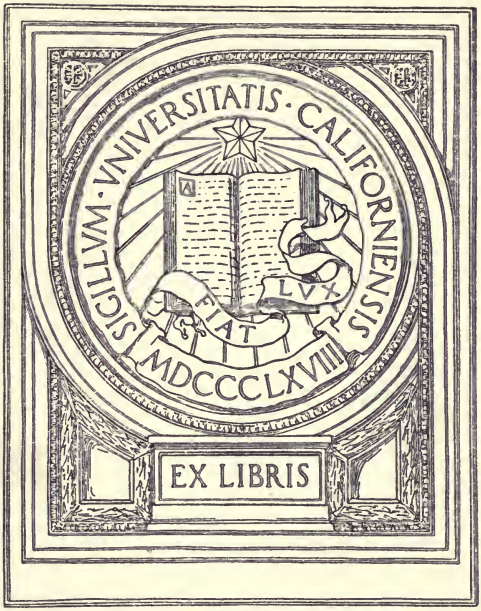
THE WOMAN

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE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THE WOMAN

A Novel By

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

FOUNDED ON
WILLIAM C. DE MILLE'S PLAY
OF THE SAME NAME

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
W. B. KING

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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The Bobbs-Merrill Company

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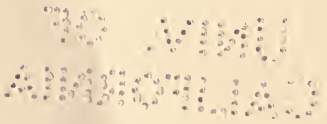

PRESS OF
BRAUNWORTH & CO.
BOOKBINDERS AND PRINTERS
BROOKLYN, N. Y.

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THE WOMAN

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

THE WOMAN

CHAPTER I

FIVE YEARS BEFORE

THE Woman looked up from her task of fitting the trunk tray into exact position. Standish noted vaguely that the effort of packing had not made her red or frowsy. Even as she sat there on the floor beside the nearly-full trunk, with a litter of garments about her, her pose was not ungraceful. Yet her face was oddly tense, and her clenched hands spoke of self-control hard to maintain.

"No," she said patiently, as though trying to teach a lesson to some rather stupid child, "that isn't what I mean, at all. I mean, it's—over. Can't you understand?"

"Why, yes," answered Standish, "of course I understand. Why shouldn't I? It's over. You will

be safe at your aunt's house by six o'clock this evening, and you will start for Europe to-morrow, just as you arranged. And our wonder-week is ended. But there was no need to remind me, was there? For the past six days I've been counting off every hour as they say a condemned man does. And for the next three months I'll be counting every—"

"Oh!" interrupted the Woman, her hard-worn patience going to pieces. "Won't you understand? I said it was over. *Over!* Not for three months or for any other time. But for always. Why do you make me put it this way? I tried to say it more—"

Standish had crossed the room in three steps. He lifted the Woman to her feet, and he looked into her eyes searchingly, bewildered; seeking to read there a subtle joke whose point his grosser masculine mind had missed. The Woman was forever dazzling and mocking him with quick unexpected shifts of thought which his slower perceptions took long to grasp. It used to remind him of an owl flapping in pursuit of a humming-bird. He had said so once. And the Woman had laughed, well pleased.

But there was no laughter now in her deep eyes.

No more light. They were dully resolute, hard with a sort of sullen grief. They were the eyes of one who enters a dentist's office—mounts the witness-stand against his own interest;—must break dire news to a recipient unfit to bear it;—what you will —the look of one who hates the duty assigned, but who has absolutely no idea of flinching from it. And, behind all, lurked pain that external stoicism could have masked from no one—except a man.

And Standish, at last reading in part the expression, felt his own face grow blank and flaccid. Even now, he could not comprehend. But something, of a sudden, lay like hot lead within him. And he dimly knew the 'something' was his heart.

"You don't mean"—he began thickly, his throat sanded and sore.

The Woman nodded.

"But," he protested lamely, "it—it can't be. Why, girl, you love me!"

"I don't," she answered, her voice dreary and flat. "I don't love you. And—and now I know I never did. It is horrible, isn't it? I'm so sorry."

"You speak as if you'd broken a cut-glass dish,"

said Standish, his senses rallying after the primal blow. "Will you please tell me just what you mean?"

"Is it necessary?" she asked wearily. "Can't we spare each other needless pain?"

"Needless pain," he echoed; "when the ship has sunk what is the sense in saving the anchor? You say you don't love me. Then why—?"

"I thought I did. Oh, I was so sure I did! But little by little, for days, I've begun to understand. I lay awake all last night forcing myself to see things just as they are. And by the time daylight came, it was all clear to me. *Don't* look at me like that! Do you suppose I enjoy talking so? It has to be said. And you're not making it a bit easy for me."

"Forgive me," he answered, a bitter note creeping into his heavy voice. "You are wrecking me. You are smashing all I hold dear. You are making my future as barren as a rainy sea. Forgive me for not making the process a bit easy for you."

"You have no right to say such things!" she flared. "It is cowardly. It is ungenerous."

"Why? Because you are a woman? A woman

may flay a man. She may break his life to pieces for her own amusement. If he dares to protest, he is cowardly and ungenerous. Because she is a *woman.* A man's hands are tied behind him by that asinine old tradition. How about the woman who pommels a man when she knows his hands are so tied? Isn't she as 'cowardly' and 'ungenerous' as I would be if I thrashed a cripple? And yet women clamor for their 'rights!'—Rights! With one-tenth of the 'rights' that silly chivalry showers upon women, I could conquer the whole world!"

"But you could not conquer one woman. If I begged you to avoid a scene it was as much for your own sake as for mine. Since you *will* have one, let's get it over with as quickly as we can. Here is the situation in a handful of words: I met you. You weren't like any other man I'd ever known. You didn't fall down and worship me at sight—or pretend to, which comes to the same thing. It didn't seem to interest you that I had money and that other men made fools of themselves over me. And then your Quixotic ideas about politics and government and all that sort of thing, appealed to me. These

and other reasons of the same kind made me think I was in love with you."

"You didn't *think*. You were! And—"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Does it matter—now? Isn't that also an effort to save the anchor after the wreck? But never mind. I thought I loved you. With your impractical high-souled ideas about political reform and the people's wrongs you seemed to me a modern Galahad; instead of just a—Don Quixote."

"*Ah!*"

"I'm sorry it makes you wince. But it's the truth. And the truth is generally painful."

"You are right," he agreed. "In fact I know of only one thing more painful. And that is a lie. Is it a lie you are speaking now? Or was it a lie you've been living for the past week?"

"Neither, I think," said the Woman. "But that isn't the point. When you wanted to marry me, I felt as though a demigod had stooped to earth. That isn't the way to feel when one marries. I didn't know it then. I do, now. And perhaps the knowledge that I would not be allowed to marry you

just yet, or even acknowledge our engagement, helped strengthen the infatuation. Then when I found I must go to Europe so soon, and you begged me to give you just this one 'perfect week', it all seemed so natural—so right—so beautiful—"

"I was wrong!" he cried. "I was insane. I had no right to suggest it. I had no right to let you consent."

But, womanlike, she would not let him blame himself.

"It was *not* your fault," she cried. "Or if there were fault at all it was mine as much as yours. I say you 'begged' me to come here. You did not. At your first hint I was as eager as you. Perhaps," she added with a return of her forced hardness, "it was not quite the way one would expect a Galahad or a Quixote to spend a week. But the blame is as much mine as yours. So don't let's talk of that. Can't we both forget it?"

"Forget it? Why, girl, it's my whole life."

"It is an episode whose memory can be sweet or bitter as we choose to make it. We were clever enough to leave no trace when we went away. I'm

supposed to be on a visit and your worthy constituents were told that their congressional representative was going away to recuperate, somewhere in the mountains. You will return from your vacation much benefited—if a little vague as to its details. And I will go back to my aunt's to-night, prepared to start happily on my European trip to-morrow morning. That is all."

"All?"

Standish gasped the monosyllable, horrified at her light matter-of-fact tone and too masculine to see with what fearful effort it was assumed. Blankly ignorant of women he did not seek to read below the surface composure. The horror of misery that lay behind the wide hard eyes told him nothing. Then, with a sharp revulsion his nerves gave way. He broke into a rough choking laugh.

"Oh, the comic-opera situation!" he gurgled. "In melodrama, it is the black-mustached seducer who lures the pale-faced village belle into an unlicensed honeymoon and then casts her off with a few well chosen words of cynicism. And generally she perishes in a convenient snow-storm. But look at the

modern turn you give the old situation! At the end of one glorious week you turn me out-of-doors and prepare to take up the thread of life where you left it off, just as if nothing had broken that smug thread."

"Nothing *has* broken it," she declared. "I don't mean that anything shall. I have a right to be happy. And I am going to be. I could let this blast my whole future if I chose. I could suffer like Hester Prynne and all the rest. Or, even after finding I don't love you, I could marry you in order to win back a name that no one shall ever know that I have lost. But being neither a fool nor a martyr, I shall not become a second Hester Prynne. And I most assuredly shall not become your wife. What is left? Why, to be sane and to get what legitimate pleasure and interest out of life I can. And that is what I am going to do. If you are wise you will follow my example."

"Pleasure? Interest?" he repeated, his momentary hysteria leaving him apathetic and hopeless. "God grant you may find both! *I* can look forward to neither. Oh, girl, I love you! You are mad—

insane—to talk this way—to plan what you are planning. Can't you see it? Won't you give me a chance to get back your love? I had it once—I can get it again if you will give me the chance. I *know* I can make you happy."

A smile that savored of the rack twisted her set lips—and died before it reached her eyes.

"No, dear," she contradicted gently, "you can't make me happy. I doubt if you can make any woman happy. A woman—one who didn't know the un-Galahad side of you as I do—might respect or even reverence you. But you couldn't hold her *love.* No woman ever really loved a man because he was good; or because he fought against political evils or slew dragons. She might admire him for it. But admiration and reverence are pretty poor every-day fare. When your wife wanted you to say crazy adoring things to her, you would be thinking out a new insurgent plan by which you could block the machine in congress. When she wanted you to notice her new dress or the new way she had fixed her hair, you'd be scheming how to break up senatorial graft by direct elections. When she hoped

you'd buy her some candy or a few flowers on your way home from the Capitol, you'd be too busy framing your next speech to think of such trifles. Those same trifles and his wild extravagance of praise and the quick noticing of anything she puts on to please him, are the cords that lash a woman's heart to a man's. Not her pride in the way he is fighting his country's political battles."

"Listen!" pleaded Standish. "I'll give it all up: my seat in congress, my fight for the people, my political hopes—everything! Everything that I have worked for until it has all grown dearer to me than life. I'll give it all up—*all*—if you will marry me and give me a chance to make you love me again."

She looked at him curiously. And the hard light in her eyes softened ever so little.

"You mean it!" she exclaimed. "You honestly mean it. And—and perhaps you'd *do* it. Oh, if you had talked like that, sooner, it might have changed everything."

"It isn't too late!" he urged vehemently, almost incoherent, "I'll do all I said. And I'll do anything

else you want. I'm talking like a schoolboy, I know; but, sweetheart, you must see I'm in earnest. Just give me the chance. Just the *chance!*"

But the brave tortured eyes were hard again. And he knew, even before she spoke, that his appeal had failed.

"It's no use," she returned. "For the moment you almost carried me off my feet. I can understand now why your speeches that read so stupidly, can sway people. But it's only an impulse. Inside of an hour you would question it. Inside of a day you would regret it—"

"No! No!"

"And inside of a week you would be secretly reading every scrap of congressional news and cursing your lot at being out of the fight. It would be like all sacrifices. In time one gets to hating the person one made them for. Every time a president was elected you'd say to yourself: 'But for my wife *I* might be in his shoes!' Oh, it would be misery for us both! It would be even worse than this week."

"This week? This week that was so wonderful to me!"

"It was wonderful to me, at first. But—do you remember the evening I put on the fluffy tea-gown—the gray chiffon one with the shell-pink sleeve lining and facing? You don't. Of course not—I put it on the third evening we were here. I'd saved it as a surprise for you, for it was the prettiest thing I'd brought with me."

"I don't think I remember it. But what has that got to do with—?"

"I put it on. And I came and stood in front of you. You were glancing over a newspaper that had just come in. You looked up at me. Your eyes were all alight. I was so glad you liked the gown. I waited to hear the beautiful things you'd say about the way I looked in it. Then you spoke. You said: 'By the gods, the machine has got poor Kelly at last! They've smashed him. And he has a wife and daughters, too. Poor devil! He might have expected it—the stupid way he tried to fight them. They'll never get *me!*' Do you remember?"

"Remember?" cried Standish. "I do, indeed. Kelly had no brains. Nothing but his honesty. And his attack on the machine was like a child's battering

a wall with bare fists. I told him long ago that— *Now,* what have I said to rile you?" he broke off as the Woman turned away in mock despair.

"Oh, nothing!" she answered. "Nothing except to prove how right I was."

"You were talking about a tea-gown, weren't you?" he asked, trying to gather up the strands of conversation.

"Was I?" she replied wearily. "Well, I'm not, now. I was trying to prove that you aren't the sort of man to hold a woman's love. Not *my* love, anyhow. And I've proved it. Don't ask me how. You wouldn't understand."

"Then give me a chance to. As far as I can make out, you won't marry me because I didn't think to admire a pink-and-gray dress and because you're afraid I wouldn't bring you candy and flowers. For a grown woman to—"

"When one walks out of one's way to avoid a 'Danger' sign," she said, "it is not from fear of the board and the painted words on it; but what they stand for. Yet it would be hard to explain that to a savage."

"And—"

"I could weary us both by piling up reason on reason for not marrying you," she went on. "But what would be the use? It would only bring us both to the starting-point of 'I don't love you'. It's an old copy-book maxim, for instance, that respect is the only sure foundation for marriage. Like most foundations it is buried so deep that one knows it's there only because the house doesn't collapse. But it *must* be there. And—what respect could either of us have for the other, in later saner days; when we remembered this past week? It seemed a glorious thing. For we were crazy. But *I* am sane again. And so will *you* be, in the course of time. We would both feel self-loathing whenever memory chanced to bring this week back to us. And no loathing is ever confined to one's *self*. You can see how it would be."

"No!" he denied, "you are wrong. We would never regret this week. You are ten thousand times dearer to me for—"

"To-day, yes; to-morrow, no. And to-day will die; but there would be many thousand to-morrows.

I am not going to take that chance. I am not going to let *you* take it. I would not, even if I loved you. I didn't see all this in time. I do, now. I am not going to try to tell you what the knowledge—the realization—of our madness means to me. But if there is a blacker hell, the Old Testament neglects to describe it. It will be with me as long as I live and no matter how I live. Waking or sleeping, underneath everything else, will live that one vile, crawling, shameful memory. And yet you wonder why I refuse to add to its horror by bringing still more misery into my life? You don't understand why I mean to seize all the happiness I can, as a man in mortal pain will fight to get even a partial anesthetic? You don't understand—?"

"To-day there seems much I don't understand," he retorted. "But one thing is very clear to me: the course you've chosen is an impossible one for you. You *must* marry me. If not for love, then because it is the right thing to do. I do not ask you to care for me or even to live in the same house with me. But for your own sake you must—"

"It is for my own sake that I must do nothing of

the sort. You get your ideas of life from books. Too many people do that. From books whose authors are no wiser than their readers. I am not going to let this one mistake ruin every bit of my future. I won't let one moment of folly blot all my life. Men don't. Why should women? There is still much in the world for me. And for you, too, if you'll look at it sanely. Oh, I know my kind of sanity shocks you. But it *is* sanity. You are held back by centuries of traditions. Your father began life as a millionaire's son. Mine began it in an Irish orphanage. Your grandfather was a supreme court judge. I don't know who mine was. There must be something, after all, in this talk of heredity. And I'm glad if my ancestry—or lack of it—lets me live sensibly and not according to cast-iron family tradition. For instance, I don't suppose there's a girl in all your sisters' set who would have consented to a 'honeymoon' like ours, is there? Your sisters wouldn't have done such a thing, would they?"

"No!" he exclaimed in involuntary disgust.

At his word and tone a faint red showed across the Woman's face as if he had struck her lightly

with his open hand. But at once she recovered herself.

"Let's say good-by and part as friends," she suggested. "No irremediable harm is done. So long as one's own personal actions don't hurt others, they can't be called wrong. And, except for myself, you are the only person hurt. You'll have to stand that as part of the price of—"

"You are mistaken," he broke in. "Others, besides myself, *are* affected."

"Who?"

"I don't know. But this I do know:—No one can live to himself or herself. No one can say: 'My fault or folly hurts me alone.' In this miserable old world of ours, we are all tangled up in one another's destinies. And when one tears loose the cord that binds him, the vibration of that wrench will soon or late reach and affect people whom he perhaps does not even know."

"The cord you speak of," she mocked, "is that holy bond known as Conventionality, isn't it? The bugbear that the weak and the prim have raised to scare the strong and the courageous."

"No. The beaten path that ten billion failures and tragedies since the birth of Time have shown to be the only safe one. Conventionality's path may seem to the near-sighted to be twisted foolishly, and unnecessarily long. But each of those twists represents the place where the Man in Front wisely stepped aside to avoid the pitfall into which the man ahead of him had tumbled. And the short cuts in the long tortuous road are white with the bones of failures."

"I'm going to walk over those same whitened bones in *my* short cut from one point of Conventionality's twisted path to another. I'm going to walk back from a union that would mean misery to me—back to the pleasant home life and social life I love and don't mean to lose. Don't worry. No whitened bones will turn under me and bring me a fall. I can defy the bogy, Conventionality, and still live happy."

"Others have defied the bogy. You are not the first nor the millionth. To most of them it seemed as safe as it seems to you."

"Yes? I should like to meet them and compare notes."

"You will not meet them," he answered grimly, "but you will tread on their bones—in the short cut. Even as some future challenger of Conventionality shall one day tread on yours."

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL AND THE BOY

THE Hotel Keswick telephone girl was a character. Even the politicians who made the big Washington caravansary their headquarters recognized that. Some of them had sought to unbend from their labors at law-building and law-sapping long enough to try to improve their casual acquaintanceship with her. But they had one and all abandoned the effort.

Not that Miss Wanda Kelly was in the very least shy. Nor did she, after the manner of some of her kind, employ stiffness as the nearest procurable substitute for dignity; even as she used imitation "Val" instead of Irish lace on her collars. No, Miss Kelly had a responsive word for everybody. Only, sometimes that word had a queer way of searing instead of flattering.

"If Joan of Arc had been brought up in the

alleys," once observed the Honorable Tim Neligan, "and if she'd been nursed on iron tonic and learned her alphabet from George Ade's fables, she'd have been a dead ringer for Wanda Kelly."

To which the more or less Honorable Jim Blake had made reply:

"Maybe that hello girl was all Wanda when she started out. But a Keswick switchboard course has made her all Kelly. I don't know why no one reports her for being fresh. Except, maybe, that he'd have to tell what he said to her to bring out the fresh come-back."

In any case, no one did report Wanda Kelly. And while men continued to be drawn by her surface familiarity and to be sent scuttling back to cover again by her aggressive power to take her own part, she continued to reign supreme at the switchboard of the Keswick.

There, in an alcove under the great garish stairway, she sat day after day manipulating her racks of switches. To her left were the telephone booths; to her right the corridor where all the political world passed her in review. Behind her—and, when

voices chanced to be raised in eagerness or dispute, in easy ear-shot—was a spot where far more history was made than in the Capitol itself.

This historic place was a deep niche known to local fame as "the amen corner". It was off the beaten track of the corridor, yet a vantage-point whence everything was visible. Here Jim Blake—long, lean, saturnine master of the machine—had a way of sitting, his eternal cigar in one corner of his mouth, his slouch hat aslant on his head or under his chair. And here, like filings to the magnet, the men who gleaned in Jim's wake, and whose political life hung on his curt nod, would cluster.

Sometimes the amen corner would be packed with them. At such times Wanda Kelly scarcely troubled to listen to the talk that so easily reached her. For she knew it would be of no import,—a few questionable stories, some generalizing as to political moves, much adulation of the grim inscrutable boss to whose ears such praise was idler than the buzz of summer flies.

But—at other times there would be only three or four men grouped around the boss. Then, as

Wanda used to say, "the hearing was good". For such conclaves meant live-wire work. And daring or ignorant, indeed, was the passing politician who ventured to break in on the little amen-corner group.

One evening as the dinner crowd was drifting along the corridor toward the huge dining-rooms, Wanda noted that the amen corner held but two men. Both of them she knew, and both were very evidently awaiting Jim Blake's return from the Capitol. More than one passer-by along the corridor nudged his companions and pointed out the elder of the corner's two occupants.

The object of these surreptitious glances was a fine-looking, rather portly man of early middle age —the Honorable Mark Robertson, former governor of New York, present representative in congress from the same state and—equally important—Jim Blake's son-in-law. More—he was the man whom the machine, at its master's orders, had slated as next speaker of the house. Yes, and perhaps if all one heard were true, for a far higher office later on.

Wanda Kelly knew this. And, thanks to over-

heard scraps of amen-corner talk, she knew much more. She had often seen Robertson. Now and then she had received a careless nod from him or from his stately young wife, Blake's only daughter, who so often while congress was in session ran down from the Robertson house in New York for a sojourn of a day or two with her husband and father at the capital.

Yet Wanda wasted fewer thoughts just now on the celebrity than on the much younger man with whom he was talking. And perhaps her thoughts had telepathic power. For, as Robertson strolled out into the foyer, his companion crossed directly to the switchboard rail and stood looking down at the girl.

Wanda did not see him. Or, if she did, it was not with her eyes. And before he could speak, the telephone buzzer rasped out.

"H'lo!" she droned in the professionally nasal tones of her trade. "Yes'm—Suite three forty-five —yes'm.—Can't get what? Oh, the five middle hooks. Of course not. No one could. Wait and I'll send a maid up to you. Not at all. Right off."

Sticking a plug in another hook, she droned:

"Three forty-five wants to be hooked up the back. Yes, *Suite* three forty-five. No, I don't know why folks who can afford a suite can't afford a maid of their own. You'd better ask her. I—"

Buz-z-z!

Another change of plugs, an instant of sympathetic listening, then:

"Yes, sir. I know how awful it must be. No, I don't use 'em, myself, but I can understand. And it came apart just as you'd got one-half your face shaved? Yes, sir. I understand you. What? *'Do well with all safety-razors?'* Oh! *'To —— with all safety razors!'* you said? I don't blame you. Wait till I connect you with the barber shop. What's that? *'Hurry like ——?'* Say! I'll stand for your sending safety-razors there if you like, but you can't order me there, too.—Oh, that's all right. 'Pology's accepted. I'll connect you with the barber shop. Barbers love to hear safety-razors sworn at."

"Wanda!" said the young man who was leaning over the rail.

It was the third time he had broken in. But, busy rattling the switch pegs, she did not hear.

"Wanda Kelly!" he exclaimed, exasperated.

She looked up with a suddenness that startled him.

"Well?" she asked sharply.

"Will—will you marry me?" he blurted, her unexpected word and look driving the speech from his lips as though he had been struck between the shoulders.

"What?" she queried in polite surprise.

"I asked," he said, trying to cover up his impetuosity with a weak show of irony, "I asked if you are going to marry me or not."

"No," she answered, unruffled. "I am not. That's the answer. Same as when you asked me before. And the time before that. And so on back to the beginning. And then some—until you can learn to take 'No' for an answer."

"I can't take it," he returned glumly, "and I won't take it. Maybe you think I get a lot of fun being thrown down like this. It means more to me

than you've got patience to hear. I'm going all to smash. Even the fellows at the office are on to it. And Mark Robertson was guying me about it, not five minutes ago. He said 'Who's the girl?' What do you think of that? When a man's own brother-in-law notices things about him—Oh, you needn't laugh. It isn't so funny to me."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know it meant so much to you."

"Do you suppose I enjoy perching up on this rail like a google-eyed Poll-parrot and squeaking 'Wanda, will you marry me?' and getting a lemon each time instead of a cracker?"

"But no one asks you to. I haven't 'led you on', as they say in books. At first you used to talk a whole lot about what a fine splendid thing it was for a fellow and a girl to be jolly good friends, as you and I were, with no silly sentimentality. And then, before I knew it—"

"Well, I didn't know it either," he growled. "It just happened. What's friendship between a man and a girl, anyway? It's just a trick to catch one or both of them with their guard down. That's

what it's done to me. When I met you here last fall and we got to talking about Chicago and found we were both homesick for the old place, I thought you were the dandiest girl ever. And I wanted to be friends with you. And you let me chat with you here, sometimes, and I kept thinking how platonic and unslushy it all was. And then, before I'd fairly got those bearings, I was off on another tack and crazy in love with you."

"It wasn't my fault."

"It sure wasn't any one else's. And it's played horse with me. When I first knew you, I was a man. And *now* what am I? You've got three guesses. *I* don't know."

"When is a man not a man?" she asked with a lightness that a closer observer of women might have fancied was forced.

"Well, Mr. Bones," he grumbled in sorry jest, "when *is* a man not a man? When he's in love, I suppose. Then he's a measly door-mat. And I'm not flattering the door-mat, at that. But it's what I am. I lie down and let you wipe your little feet on my heart. I hate it—and I wouldn't stop it if I

could. Say, Wanda, the first time you said you wouldn't marry me—or maybe it was the second time—I got a rush of self-respect to the head. I made up my mind I'd forget you and put you clean out of my life and never see you or think of you again. So I—came trotting meekly back and asked you once more. And I'll keep on asking, till the end of the chapter. I don't want to. I wish I had a third foot, so I could kick myself for doing it. But I have to. And—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Wanda as the buzzer purred noisily.

Then, dropping into her professional drone, she said:

"H'lo! What? Best show in town? Depends on whether you're here with the Baptist Conference or the Liquor Dealers' Convention. Hold the wire a second. I'll give you Information. I—what? No, thanks. I've got another engagement. No, I can't break it. Nice of you to ask me. No. Nothing doing. Yes, that's final. *Final.* G'by."

"There!" she continued, turning from the board,

"a perfectly good invitation for dinner and a show and supper afterward. And I had to throw it down. 'Heaven will protect the woiking goil'—but it won't give her many good times."

"Who was he?" demanded the youth peremptorily.

" ' "Oh—kind—sir—I—do—not—know"—said —she—with—a—patient—smile,' " lisped Wanda. "Except that he speaks English with a Philadelphia accent and called up his wife over long distance, an hour ago, and told her he'd be detained in Washington all night on business. Poor fellow! He says he's lonesome and—"

"The cur! Give me his number and I'll go around and push his impudent face in!"

"Don't bother. I just told you 'Heaven will protect the woiking goil'. Without any strong-arm help from you. Oh, don't look so cross! It's all in the day's work."

"It's horrible that you should be subjected to that sort of thing!" he declared. "Wanda, why won't you let me marry you and take you away from it all? You surely can't *like* this sort of life!"

It would have needed keener ears than his to catch the undercurrent of weariness in her voice as she made answer:

"Why shouldn't I like it? It's full of excitement. And there's lots of responsibility attached to it."

"But why won't you—?" he began.

To turn the talk away from its old trend, she broke in, almost at random:

"You don't realize the power of a phone girl's job. No outsider does. Nowadays there's nothing from love-affairs to market orders that isn't transmitted over the phone. People from a thousand different points call up people at a thousand other points. Every pair of people thinks they are talking unheard by the world at large and that just they two can hear each other. Each of those thousands thinks that. But the telephone girl hears them all. I read in an old book once about a demon named Asmodeus who used to flit about by night and lift the roofs off of houses to see what people were doing. If he were living now he could save a lot of time and work and bother by getting a job at central. We—"

Buzz-z!

"H'lo!" droned Wanda. "No. Mr. Blake hasn't come in yet. Any message? A'ri'."

"Yes," she went on in her own voice; "what the telephone girl doesn't hear isn't worth the hearing. We know more than the secretary of state and the whole secret service put together. Because we hear both sides."

"But," urged the man, a little flustered as he recalled torrid telephonic talks of his own, "aren't people careful not to—?"

"Careful?" she mocked. "On the *phone?* Not one in forty. And the 'careful' ones are the easiest of all. They mostly forget that central is a live girl and not a machine. If there's anything a telephone girl doesn't know it's because it isn't worth knowing."

"But doesn't the law forbid telephone girls to listen or repeat—?"

"The law? When a law is made that can stop a woman from using her ears and her tongue—"

"We're getting away from what I was saying to you," suggested he. "Why won't you—?"

"And," Wanda hurried on, forestalling him, "sometimes the things we pick up on the wire are as good as any best seller. I had a couple once that I followed all the way from the first talk to the divorce. He called up one day to ask if he could come and see her that evening. And next morning when he phoned, he called her sweetheart and told her he'd been in a dream of paradise ever since he said good night to her. And so it went on for months till it's a wonder the wire didn't get sugar-coated. Then he called up the minister and the florist. And the day after the honeymoon he began calling her up again. If he had to work at the office in the evening, he'd phone her to see if she was all right. Then another man began to phone her to see if hubby was away. And one evening hubby left for New York and missed his train and phoned that he was coming back home for the night and would start next morning instead. A servant took the message. I guess she forgot to deliver it to Mrs. Wife. For the next morning friend hubby was on the phone making a date for a talk with a big divorce lawyer."

"And that's the dirty side of life you have to listen to, day in and day out? It's shameful!"

"It doesn't leave one with many illusions. But that's only the worst part of it. There's a lot more. Each of the big centrals is the whole world boiled down and filtered through the switchboard. And the hello girl gets the essence of it all. Every bit of it comes to her. The good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the order for a rib-roast with the bone sent along and the queer sobby call of the woman who tells the doctor her baby is dying and won't he *please hurry?* A man hiccups a lie to his wife about being kept late at work and a financier speaks ten words that sends Wall Street screeching up a tree. Everything goes to the switchboard: engagement announcements and death notices, winners and losers, great moments and twaddle. And the operator gets it. She is a sort of Fate that sees that the right people meet one another. Then, again like Fate, having put them in touch, she has to let them work out their own affairs. Oh, the trouble we could save sometimes by butting in with a few sentences that would straighten out the ugliest tan-

gles! It's hard not to interfere when I've got the whole world under my two hands."

"The whole world under your two little, *little* hands!" he said softly, reaching for one of them as he spoke.

But the buzzer rushed to the rescue of its high priestess with a sudden noisy purr.

"Mrs. Robertson?" droned Wanda to the transmitter. "No'm. Mrs. Robertson is not at the Keswick. Did you wish to be connected with Governor Robertson's suite? No'm. I don't know whether she's expected in Washington soon or not. A'ri."

"Friend of your sister's," she explained, turning from the transmitter. "She said Mrs. Robertson wrote her she was coming down from New York some day this week."

"Grace spends more time on the trains during the session than she does at home," laughed the youth. "She wanted to close the New York house and come down here to stay all winter. But Mark won't let her. He knows how fond she is of old Manhattan and what a lot of friends she has there. So she compromises by living in both places and in neither.

But, Wanda, you've simply got to listen to me," he went on with a return of his boyish impulsiveness. "I love you. And I—"

"Mr. Blake!" she protested, half laughing, half distressed, "I—"

"*Mr.* Blake!" he echoed ruefully. "How long since I've been *Mr.* Blake, to you? Haven't I begged you to call me 'Tom'? It's a bum name and it hasn't an ounce of romance in it. But when *you* say it, it kind of sounds as if Handel had built it out into an oratorio. I always call you 'Wanda'. Why can't you call me—?"

"I am a telephone operator," she said with mischievous demureness, "and you are Mr. Thomas Blake, prominent on the district attorney's staff, only son of the great Jim Blake, and brother to a woman the Sunday papers call a society queen."

"Lord!" he growled, "are you trying to ring social standing in on me—at *this* stage of the game?"

"If you care to put it that way," she answered more seriously, "I certainly am."

"What rot!"

"Yes? Yet I notice you didn't come across to

speak to me until Governor Robertson had gone away. And you never have thought to introduce him to me when you and he have passed here together. He has been governor of New York. He may some day be president. Would it make any sort of hit with him to have his brother-in-law marry a telephone girl that half his political friends have always been trying to jolly? Would he care to say to Mr. Neligan, for instance: 'Remember that little hello girl you wanted to kiss and who slapped your face for it? Well, she's my wife's sister-in-law.' "

"Don't!" exclaimed Tom Blake. "It isn't true. And—"

"And," pursued Wanda, "would your sister call on me at my boarding-house? Would she ask me to come and see her?"

"*Would* she?" cried Tom, blustering to drown a twinge of treasonable doubt. "You bet she would! You don't know Grace. She's all right. As white as they make them. If she knew I loved any girl at all—no matter who—she'd be the very first to put her arms around her and—and—"

"Then," said Wanda gently, "don't tell her; and keep your ideal."

"Oh!" he scoffed, nettled, "you think—?"

"I think," she finished, "we belong in the twentieth century and not in a Laura Jean Libbey novel. I like you. You're all right—except what happened to you. But I'm not in your class. A lot of things count besides birth and education nowadays. I've got both of *them,* all right, even if I've learned to talk as if I had neither. I had an education. A real one. A pretty good school and all that —before father died. But it's hard cash that scores every time over education. All education can do for a girl to-day is to make her sick to get out of the class her bank account puts her in. That's why I'm here and why I've got to talk and act like this. It makes it easier. It's a sort of armor. Things don't hurt so much."

"Don't say such things. They hurt. Isn't there any more congenial work that you could take up? With your education, you could—"

"I could starve in a dozen daintily genteel ways. I started my professional life as a stenographer.

But I soon found it was pleasanter to work for a corporation. You see, a corporation doesn't try to kiss you or want to take you out to lunch. Don't look disgusted—*please*. I'm right in not marrying you. I've got as much pride in my own way, I guess, as you have. Maybe more."

"Pride doesn't come on in this scene at all!" he protested. "Look here, Wanda, I hate to repeat myself so often and to make a specialist of myself on a single subject. But you've got to marry me. I love you. And I'm going to keep right on getting more and more in love with you. And I've got a fine working idea that you care just a little bit for me. So just say yes and save us both a whole lot of trouble. *Please!*"

She shook her head until the metal band that held the receiver to her ear threw off a dozen silvery reflections from the dusk of her hair.

"Then," he demanded, "give me one good sane reason for saying 'no'."

"Oh, haven't I given you enough reasons?"

"Punk reasons, every one of 'em. A *good* reason, I said."

"There *is* one great reason," she said slowly. "One that I haven't told you."

"You mean you don't care for me?"

"I didn't say so. We needn't go into that. But I—"

Buz-z-z!

With a little sigh she turned to the transmitter.

"Yes," she droned. "Yes. Mr. Standish is stopping here. No. I don't think he's come back from the Capitol yet. No. I'm sure he hasn't. Shall I tell him to call you up when he comes in? No? A'ri'."

CHAPTER III

THE MACHINE

"THE reason!" insisted Tom, "you haven't told me yet."

"The reason," she answered quietly, "is that you are Jim Blake's son."

"What's that got to do with it?" he asked, puzzled.

"Everything. When I met you I didn't know he was your father. If I had—"

"But what difference does it make? He's one of the biggest men in Washington just now, of course. Perhaps *the* biggest. But if you're going to rake up that silly subject of social standing again—"

"I'm not."

"Then why does the fact that I'm his son—"

"Did you ever hear your father speak of Frank E. Kelly?" she asked; and the slangy light manner had fallen away from her.

"Frank E. Kelly?" repeated Tom. "No. Not

that I remember. He's a novelty to *me*. Who was he? A 'white hope,' or—?"

"He was my father."

"Oh, I didn't mean to— So dad knew your father, did he?"

"Yes. My father was a congressman. From New York. Just about the time when Mr. Blake's organization was first getting its teeth into the country's throat. Unluckily for my father, he was honest. Of course Mr. Blake and the rest didn't know that when they put him in office, or they—"

"Oh, come now! That's rather rough on—"

"When one of their crooked bills came up—a bill as crooked as this Mullins bill that every one is so excited over, this session—when such a bill came up, father refused to vote for it. The trouble with him was he was an insurgent who tried to insurge a few years too soon; before Mr. Standish welded the unorganized insurgents into a compact fighting force. It was a close fight, and father's vote, with a few more that he influenced, beat the bill. So Blake and the others made an example of him—'for the good of the party', as they expressed it."

She broke into a little laugh that was not good to hear. Tom Blake winced. But before he could speak, she continued.

" 'The good of the party!' That was the phrase. They cooked up some bribery business and saddled the blame on him. They disgraced him. They broke him—body and soul. For being honest! He died before he could win back the good name they stole from him. And the *Honorable* Jim Blake was running the party machine then, as he is to-day."

She ceased speaking. And a little silence rested between them. Then Tom said in a voice none too steady:

"I wish I could tell you I know you're mistaken. But I'm afraid you're not. I know they do those things—as you said—'for the good of the party!' Oh," he broke out fiercely, "it's that sort of game I can't understand. I can *never* understand. I know them all. And personally they're white men, tender-hearted, clean, honorable. But professionally—Why, for instance, there's my brother-in-law, Mark Robertson. He and Grace have been married over three years now, and his love for her is still a sort

of adoration. He's the perfect lover-husband. But as a lawyer he won the name of being a bloodhound. And, as a politician,—well, he's like the rest. They'll all resort to the dirtiest trickery, the rottenest sort of corruption. I can't make it out. Half the time I feel as if there wasn't a decent man among them. And, the other half, I'm proud to have such generous big-hearted chaps in my acquaintance list. But why should dad's political deal affect you and me? I'm not to blame if—"

"And I'm not blaming you. But I've been brought up to hate Jim Blake and his crowd and to pray for a chance to get back at them. I know that isn't a meek and womanly way to talk. But it's the way I feel. I—I loved my father so! My square, honest, *white* father. And they killed him. Ah, there's something coming to that crowd! To Blake and all of them! And it's coming from *me*. Some day I may be able to deliver the goods! I—I oughtn't to talk so to you," she caught herself up, half apologetically. "I'm afraid I hurt you. Perhaps you didn't fully know—"

"I've been finding out," answered Tom. "These

last few months since I've been in the thick of Washington politics have opened my eyes to a lot of things I wish I'd never seen. But none of those things has a right to come between you and me, Wanda. The machine's done harm enough without breaking up our two lives. And if you really like me—"

"I do," she said, with a momentary return of her old manner. "But we don't marry every one we like—unless we happen to travel in the Newport set. If I married you," she continued more gravely, "it would look as if I were forgiving what they did. And I'll never do that. I lived too close to the horror of it all. I don't want restitution from them. There *is* no restitution. I want to get square with them. I want it more than everything else on earth. And as long as I keep on feeling that way I can never—"

"Why in blazes did it have to be *your* father, of all men, that they chose to—!"

"It didn't. He was just one of hundreds that the party machine smashed. He used to say the machine was like the Juggernaut car, crushing every-

thing that dared stand in its path. Jim Blake guides that car. And he guides it over the bodies of better men. He and his crowd prosper. But something's coming to them, just the same. One man can do wrong, perhaps, now and then, and get away with it. But a whole crowd can't go on ruining decent men's lives for years and trampling on the country's rights, without one or two of them some day suffering for it."

"But—"

"The machine has tried to run over the wrong man at last. And its joints and wheels are rattling with fear. Standish became an insurgent. But he had the cleverness and the strength not to be crushed. And he has rallied weaker stupider insurgents around him, till he has formed an obstacle the machine can't override. He's done more. He's roused the whole people. And the people are watching their representatives so closely, at last, that a lot of crooks *have* to play fair or lose their jobs. Oh, I'm following Standish's work! When he clashed horns with Jim Blake over this Mullins railroad bill it did me good all over. For when Stand-

ish defeats the Mullins bill he'll break the backbone of Jim Blake's political power. Yes, and he'll smash Jim Blake's plan to put Governor Robertson in the speaker's chair. He'll keep Robertson out. And he'll sit there himself. And when he does—his gavel blows will beat the Juggernaut car into scrap-iron."

"Wanda!" protested Tom, amazed at her tirade. "Haven't we better things to talk than politics? I'll tell dad about your father and see if he won't—"

"No! You mustn't. You must promise not to tell him who I am. Promise!"

"Oh, I promise, if you like. But I can't bear to have you go on hating dad. He's the kindest, dearest old chap alive. Maybe he didn't know—"

"Does the organization do anything Jim Blake doesn't know and dictate?"

"Mister Thomas Blake!" paged a liveried boy, at the far end of the corridor. "Mister Thomas Blake!"

Tom caught sight of a telegram on the tray the lad carried. But before he could signal the boy himself, the latter had gone out of sight.

"He's carried it to the bar with all the unerring instinct of a homing dove!" grumbled Tom. "And he'll bawl 'Mister Thomas Blake!' in that disreputable place for a solid hour if I don't go and choke him off!"

Wanda watched her suitor hurry away in search of his quarry, and her dark eyes took on a tenderer light than ever he had seen in them. Then, at sound of a chance word behind her, she became all at once her alert businesslike self again. She glanced into a little mirror that swung obliquely from the top of the switchboard. In this bit of glass, without turning, she could command a full view of the amen corner a few feet to the rear of the switchboard rail.

Three men had seated themselves there. One she recognized as the Honorable Tim Neligan; and a second as the Honorable Silas Gregg, a leggy and tow-headed representative from Kansas. The third of the trio was an iron-gray man of clean-cut face and scrupulously well groomed aspect.

Wanda knew him well, by sight. For whenever political crises swept Washington he was as certain to appear as are vultures to congregate for the feast.

He was Ralph Van Dyke, a New Yorker, and counsel for a great railroad. His was one of the shrewdest legal minds in America. And he had so carefully trained that mind to the million dark intricacies of corporation law as to be doubly worth the annual fortune he reaped for the 'interests'.

Ralph Van Dyke might have been governor, senator—anything he chose. Where he could not have stormed his way he could have wormed it. But he preferred to pull the strings and to use his almost uncannily agile brain in making the puppets dance and in shaping a nation's straight laws to fit his crooked will. What Jim Blake was in politics, Ralph Van Dyke was in corporation law. The chance word Wanda had just overheard had been spoken by him.

"Are things still going as badly with the Mullins bill as when you wired me to-day?" he had asked Neligan.

"Worse!" grunted the latter. "And then some. What are politics coming to, anyhow? In the old days the game was worth while. A man took his share and no questions asked."

"But the bill—" said Van Dyke.

"Well, we got the house adjourned without coming to a vote. That's the best I can report. At that, it's only adjourned till ten o'clock to-night."

"All-night session," observed Gregg. "And I hate sleeping at my desk. The chairs are so small and so hard, they—"

"If things are going so badly," struck in Van Dyke, "Jim Blake ought to have foreseen the trouble. He ought not to have let the Mullins bill be reported from committee."

"Oh," returned Neligan, "we had the house cinched when it was reported. We'd have passed it, hands down, if we could have jammed it through then. But now—we may as well stand up to facts—we're as good as licked."

"So," sneered Van Dyke, "you're giving up the ship like that?"

"We don't need to," retorted Neligan. "The ship's giving *us* up. I can smell the salt water coming over the rail. If they defeat this pretty little bill of ours, Mr. Van Dyke, we'll all be splashing around in the drink."

"A year ago," mused Van Dyke, "I should have laughed at any man who could have prophesied such a thing."

"A year ago," said Gregg, "Standish hadn't got his insurgents so well in hand. And, what's a lot more to the point, he didn't have the whole sheep-faced public behind him as he has now. He's the greatest fighter, ever. And to think when the party elected him we thought he'd come in and be counted, as meek as Moses."

"But, gentlemen," urged Van Dyke impatiently, "this bill *has* to pass."

"Sure it has," gloomily assented Neligan. "Only it can't. Unless something explodes Standish before it comes to a vote. Oh, it's the people! They're reform-crazy. They don't know what they want, and nine years out of ten they don't want anything except to stay asleep and let the right crowd handle the country. But when a man like Standish gets them to listen to him, they all wake up and yell for reform and purity in politics as hard as a waking baby squalls for its bottle. They've made him a popular idol."

"The people!" scoffed Van Dyke. "They make an idol one minute and overturn it the next."

"That's right," agreed Gregg, "but the Mullins bill will be defeated before they get time to overturn Standish. Take my own case. I'm as good an organization man as any one. It'd be a lot to me to vote for the Mullins bill. But I daren't. The folks out home are watching me like cats at a mouse-hole. I'm getting hundreds of letters and telegrams from 'em every day telling me what'll happen to me if I don't vote with Standish against the bill. If I vote for it I lose my job. This'll be my last glimpse of good old Washington. And a lot of the rest are in the same boat. They've got to vote against the Mullins bill or lose their jobs. The people are awake. They really seem to have an idea we ought to keep some of our promises. And, say! After all, we *did* promise them a lot of things."

"Did we?" echoed Neligan. "We made our platform look like a cross-section of the Ten Commandments, fringed with pages of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Yah! That's the trouble. We're over-promised."

"Standish is doing his share of promising, too,"

observed Van Dyke. "Yet I notice the people seem to believe him, even now that they've stopped believing you gentlemen."

"He's new," snapped Neligan. "That's why. Folks'll always believe anything new. If the Bible could be sprung on 'em as a twentieth-century find, the millennium would be here before Decoration Day. Standish is the newest man. And he's honest, too. We've got to hand him that. He *is* honest. And somehow, people fall for honesty. It's the best graft in the whole bag. That honesty of his has caught the crowd. What he says the crowd believes. And what the crowd believes, the papers print. See the afternoon papers, to-day, either of you? Why, when I got through reading about myself, it was all I could do to keep from yelling, 'Help! P'lice! Catch me and run me in before I tear away from myself and commit a new batch of crimes!'"

"If I didn't know you, Neligan," said Van Dyke coldly, "I should say you had an acute attack of nervousness. You—"

"Who? Me? Nervous? Not I. Not a speck nervous. Only scared. Just scared to a frazzle,

that's all. Standish has got us running so fast that there's no stopping to think about bum nerves. He lands on us everywhere, till—"

"And you've grown too timid or too peaceful or too awkward to hit back?" queried Van Dyke. "Is that it?"

"No," said Neligan, not in the least ruffled by the affront in words and voice. "It isn't a question of that. We can't find a place to hit him. He's solid to the core. Not a soft spot on him."

"In the old days," reminisced Gregg sadly, as he gorged a truly wondrous quantity of loose chewing tobacco from a tarnished nickel box. "In the old days, it didn't used to matter if a man had a soft spot or not. We could lam him just the same till he got one. But I don't know what's come over the people. They used to swaller whole every juicy p'litical story we'd feed 'em. Nowadays the story's got to be so true that it reads like a 'rithmetic book before they'll believe a word of it. Every detail's got to be proved and all garnished with affidavits before the public'll eat it or the papers dare print it. And there's no such story we can get on Mat

Standish. In the good old times we could have made the public believe he'd killed his grandmother for the amalgam fillings in her teeth, easier'n we could make 'em believe to-day that he'd stayed home from prayer-meeting one rainy night when he had pneumonia. Lord! To think the day has come when campaign stories have got to be *true!*"

"It's the churches!" supplemented Neligan. "That's what's licking us all across the board. Standish has got every parson and priest in America rooting for him and telling their flocks what a splendid fellow he is and how he's purifying congress. Why, in a lot of churches, I hear, they are praying for him and against us. Say, it sure gets my goat to be prayed against! Makes me feel kind of shivery like those chaps in *Richelieu* when the old cardinal hands out his curse-of-Rome speech."

"Nonsense!" laughed Van Dyke in contempt. "Your nerves—"

"Nonsense, is it?" retorted Neligan. "Maybe the —the One who hears all those prayers knows it *isn't* nonsense. That's what's scaring *me.*"

Van Dyke looked at him in crass amazement.

Neligan shifted uneasily in his seat and reddened shamefacedly.

"If we could loosen Standish's pull with the parsons," he blustered to cover his momentary weakness, "we'd have him against the ropes in one round."

"Now you are talking sanity," approved the lawyer. "That was just what I was waiting to suggest."

"Well, we didn't wait for you to suggest it," retorted Neligan. "We aren't corporation law-contortionists, perhaps, but we've got a few grains of gray matter left. That's the first stunt we tried. We put good men on the case to look up Standish's record—to find one break that we could hang a story on."

"Well?"

"Well, from their reports, Standish seems to have led a life that would make Saint Anthony and Sir Galahad and the Pilgrim fathers look like a bunch of soused Tenderloin rounders."

"You're sure your men left nothing uncovered?"

"Do you think we'd overlook anything when the

whole game hangs on it? Do you suppose we don't know what we're up against? Why, Van Dyke, if we lose this fight—if Standish and his crowd once get control of the house—they'll begin digging up some of the pleasant little deals we buried so carefully. And then a lot of us will spend the rest of our lives in Europe. Yes. It'll be first steamer to England for the Man Higher Up. And first patrol wagon to jail for the Man Lower Down."

"That's right, Van Dyke," supplemented Gregg. "We've been over Standish's record with a microscope. He's cost us enough to make the search mighty careful. Even if you don't give *us* credit for sense enough to probe the business, you'll have to allow that Mark Robertson's no fool. And Robertson's moved heaven and hell to get something on Standish. But he can't. Robertson's got more at stake than any of us. If Standish licks him in this fight and gets the speakership it'll cost Mark Robertson more than most people could understand. Self-respect and ambition and future and—"

"It sure will," agreed Neligan. "Let's see—it must be close on five years, now, that Standish and

Robertson have been at each other's throats. Five years—no, six. Ever since Robertson ran for governor and Standish dug up that smelly franchise deal against him. Robertson's had it in for him ever since. And now that Mark's a candidate for the speakership and Standish is bossing the insurgents—gee! They'll make the Kilkenny cats look like a Methodist Sunday-school."

"I'll have a pleasant time explaining this business to Wall Street," muttered Van Dyke. "They still think everything is fixed to rush the bill straight through—"

"So everything was," declared Gregg, "till Standish butted in. I suppose you understand, Van Dyke, what all of us down here understand: if Standish defeats our Mullins railroad bill, he'll have control of the house. He'll be the next speaker. And then good-by to us! We won't be able to do your crowd any more favors, Van Dyke, and—"

"But," protested the lawyer, "on the strength of Jim Blake's advice, my clients—the N. Y. & N.—and others too—have loaded up for a rise. If the bill doesn't pass—"

"Oh, you needn't rub it in. Don't you know we chaps have a few shares, too? But what does Standish care for a clean-out in Wall Street? He's out for the presidency. And he knows the speakership's the sure road to the White House."

"But the machine's strong enough—"

"No, it isn't. It *was*. But it isn't. A lot of our best men are just like poor old Gregg here. The 'old folks at home' are watching 'em. They've got to vote against the bill or else lose their jobs. Say!" with a weak burst of fury, "why in blazes can't a man's constituents mind their own business and not go getting nosy?"

"Just when I'm all loaded up to the guards with perfectly good stock that will go to pieces like a card house when the bill fails!" wailed Gregg. "And here, to keep my constituents from snowing me under, I've got to go broke and get myself called a quitter by voting against my own interests. And there's dozens more of us in the same leaky boat."

"Cut out the whine!" ordered Neligan. "You aren't the only man who's bought stock that Standish will turn into waste paper. Oh, that man

Standish! He's got the country running after him like a flock of hens after the farmer at feeding-time. They think his private life's got Saint Peter and Anthony Comstock lashed to the mast and that his politics are so pure they'd make Abraham Lincoln feel like a ward heeler. He's no *man.* He's a bloodless saint. I don't believe he ever so much as squeezed a woman's hand in his life or swigged anything stronger than sarsaparilla. How are we going to get the hooks into a fellow like that?"

"*I* don't know how!" flared Van Dyke. "But it's Jim Blake's business to know. He was supposed to be running the house and holding our men together. What's Jim been doing to let things get away from him like this?"

"Ah, can it!" snarled Neligan, at once up in arms in defense of his adored leader. "Throw the blame all over the shop if you've got to. Rub it into *our* hair. But don't spill any of it on Jim Blake. It's easy enough for you to sit in your Broadway offices and send out your orders to the United States House of Representatives and make your tame senators sit up and bark at the right minute. But we who do

the real work down here—*we* know the conditions. And it isn't up to you or your Wall Street employers to call down a man like Jim Blake because those same conditions happen to be too big for even *his* brain to manage. Tell me this, before you hand out any more kindly criticisms: did Jim ever lose a trick that any mortal man could have taken? Did he? Isn't he the best house leader the organization ever had? Hasn't he put you people into the way of grabbing millions?"

"He never lost anything by that," answered Van Dyke with a significance that did not escape the ever-angrier Neligan.

"Never lost anything by it, didn't he?" mimicked the latter. "Why should he? You're not his mother and father. He—"

"Steady, Tim! Steady!" warned Gregg, who had had some experience with the feats his colleague's wild Irish tongue could achieve under provocation. "Go easy!"

"Easy nothing!" stormed Neligan. "Hasn't Jim got as much at stake in this deal as all you smug gray Wall Streeters? Yes, and hasn't he *more?*

Don't he know the speakership will mean the presidency? And don't he want it for Mark Robertson, so his own daughter Grace will be the 'first lady of the land'? And with all that in the jack-pot, d'you s'pose he isn't doing everything he can to win the hand? If any man could save your rotten bill—"

"Come, come!" urged Van Dyke with an effort of lofty patronage. "Don't lose your temper, man."

"Why in blue blazes *shouldn't* I lose it?" roared Neligan. "What use is it to me? Maybe you think I'm content to lie down and let you kick me for not obeying orders, when Jim and I and all of us have been working our heads off to do it. I don't mind for myself. But when you come down here and say Jim Blake's not on the job,—then I see red. They can call him the most corrupt politician in Washington—and a lot of them do. They can yell 'grafter' at him till they're black in the face. Let 'em. Jim don't care and I don't care. But when you hint that he isn't doing what you bargained with him to do—"

"Cool off, Neligan," laughed Van Dyke. "Why, good lord, Tim, I think as much of Jim Blake as you do. He's a splendid upright man and—"

"He is *not!*" fiercely contradicted Neligan. "He's a grafter. And everybody knows it. But, by the powers, he's the very *best* grafter in the business. And, what's more, he's my friend. And—"

"And the best way to show we agree on at least one thing," said Van Dyke, rising and laying a hand on each of his companions' shoulder, "is to adjourn to the bar and see what effect three or four cocktails will have on the Department of the Interior. Come along. We can leave word to be sent for when Jim comes in."

Having thus calmed the storm in the one possible fashion, he led the way toward the bar, the two others following amicably enough. As they passed the switchboard Wanda Kelly's voice was droning:

"H'lo. No. Mr. Standish isn't in yet. Yes. A'ri'."

CHAPTER IV

THE CLASH

THE telephone girl looked up a minute later to see Tom Blake hanging once more over the rail.

"I got a telegram from Grace," said he. "She sent it to me, I suppose, instead of to dad or Mark because she knew I'd be loafing around the hotel at this hour and she didn't know when either of them would be back from the Capitol. Says she'll be in Washington at eight. But, being a woman or else thinking I'm a mind-reader, she doesn't say whether it'll be eight this evening or eight to-morrow morning. I've been looking everywhere, since I got it, to find Mark and— Excuse me!"

Ex-governor Robertson was crossing the corridor toward them and Tom hurried to meet him with the telegram. Robertson's cold face, as he read the des-

patch, softened in a way that would have amazed his political foes.

"Good!" he said emphatically. "But why doesn't she tell whether she means to-night or in the morning? Isn't that just like Grace? It doesn't seem to occur to her that I'll want to meet her at the train and that I won't know which train to meet."

"Why not call her up on long distance?" suggested Tom. "If she'll be here at eight to-night she'll have left New York long before now. And if she isn't coming till morning—"

"Good idea!" assented Robertson, starting for the telephone alcove. "Sometimes you actually show a gleam of human intelligence, Tom, in spite of the way you've taken to mooning around lately. I'll—"

He stopped short, and the unwonted look of happiness froze from his face. He and Tom, on their way to the alcove, were passing the short flight of steps that led down from the outer foyer to the corridor.

And a man was coming down those steps. A tall man, whose shoulders were slightly stooped, whose dark hair was beginning to grizzle at the

temples, whose swarthy and somewhat heavy face was lined and hardened by marks that did not seem to have come from Time's brush alone.

At sight of him Robertson halted. His face darkened and his hands involuntarily clenched. The newcomer glanced across and his eye met the ex-governor's lowering gaze; then passed carelessly on to Tom.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said.

"Good evening, Mr. Standish," answered Tom.

Robertson barely returned the other's nod. But as Standish made as though to pass on, he took an impulsive step toward the insurgent chief.

"Well, Standish," he observed, steadying his voice by a palpable effort into some semblance of civility, "I understand the fight's on for to-night."

"Yes," answered Standish, pausing as though merely to wait until the other should move from his path. "An all-night session, probably."

Again, with a nod, he started toward the dining-room. But once more Mark Robertson's voice checked him.

"Did it ever occur to you, Standish," demanded

Mark, "that by opposing the Mullins bill you are betraying the party that elected you?"

Standish regarded him a moment with somber eyes from which all personal emotions seemed long since to have been burned away. Then he said in the heavy measured voice that had for years been characteristic of him:

"Did it ever occur to you, Robertson, that by trying to force the Mullins bill through, you are betraying the people who voted for you?"

"Even if it had not occurred to me," replied Robertson in icy sarcasm, "you have dinged it into my ears often enough from the floor of the house. And in the daily papers, too. You have called your former friends every opprobrious name from high-class grafters to ordinary second-story men. Standish," with palpable struggle between wrath and diplomacy, "what is the sense in splitting the party wide open the way you're trying to? We've got the others to fight without fighting each other. Can't we present a front as solid as—?"

"As two packs of wolves over the carcass of a

nation?" suggested Standish. "We could. But we will not."

"Oh, be sensible!" urged Robertson; and Tom, who knew his brother-in-law, noted the mighty effort with which the attempt at conciliation was kept up. "We're both politicians. There's no sense in spouting noble sentiments for *my* benefit. Keep them for your parsons. I was promised the speakership. And to get it away from me you turned insurgent. The Mullins bill—to-night's battle—means nothing to you but a test of power. There's no principle involved. If you can kill the bill—it will prove only you're strong enough to depose our speaker and put yourself in his chair. That's your game. Why pose as a reformer?"

"You're quite wrong," said Standish, with a certain irritating patience, "I haven't any pose. If I had I should not bother to display it for your benefit. I am not hypocrite enough to say I don't want every legitimate political reward I can earn. Who doesn't? But that's not why I'm fighting this Mullins bill of yours. And at heart you know it isn't.

I'm trying to kill this bill because it is an offense to the country's nostrils. The bill is innocent enough on its face. Van Dyke and the rest saw to that, I suppose. But when I looked at it more closely I saw it was framed to legalize the over-capitalization of every railroad in the United States and to undo what little good a few decent lawmakers have been struggling for years to accomplish."

"Then—"

"You know I'm right. That is the Mullins bill's real object. That is why you people tried to rush it through before we could have a chance to pick it apart and to hunt for the 'nigger in the wood-pile'. Well, I've studied it closely enough to make sure the pile contains very little except niggers. And I've made the public see it, too."

"Never mind bringing in your services to the dear public. You get your pay for that from them, not from me. The point is, you are lining up with our enemies. Standish, I'm not given to threatening; but from now on you're going to have an active life."

"I understand. And I look for nothing else. If

the party that elected me is betraying the people, then I must fight that party. As a white man I have no other recourse. And naturally that brings me up against you and your associates who have been robbing the country for years. That sort of thing is going to stop. One after another, I'm digging up and bringing to view such of your past transactions as were never meant to see the light: the Manhattan Railway deal, the B. T. G. bond issue, the Metropolis Gas Company failure, the New Electric franchise and the rest of the sorry lot. I've only just started in, Robertson; but already I've found out enough to know there's sufficient material to blow up the whole capital if I can get at it all. And I'm going to. Understand me clearly. *I'm going to.*"

And the heavy slow voice held no note of threat, nor did it show the faintest tinge of excitement. To Tom Blake, the conversation's non-combatant, the insurgent's rather turgid words carried far stronger message for this very absence of emotion. But they served merely to strip from Mark Robertson his last shreds of diplomatic armor.

"You talk like a reform candidate for poundmaster at Pompton, N. J.!" he retorted. "I've done nothing every one else isn't doing every day. Nothing that the custom of centuries hasn't legitimated; and nothing, I believe, that *you* haven't done. You've been tricky enough to cover your own tracks and now you come around and brand a better man with your 'holier-than-thou' epithets. You've made the people think you're a little tin god. But you can't make *me* think it."

"I can't now remember," said Standish wearily, "having tried to."

"Well, you probably know it would be time wasted," snapped Robertson. "There must be something, somewhere or other, in your past life, that wouldn't shine out to any advantage in print. Jim Blake says no one could be as good as you seem to be. And he is right. You're a man, like the rest of us. You've too much brains and too broad shoulders and too big a neck to be a bloodless saint. I'm going to camp on the trail of your past performances. And when I strike the crooked by-path I'm looking for, I'll—"

"Steady, Mark!" warned Tom. "That's no way for a white man to talk."

Mark Robertson brushed aside the interruption angrily. But Standish was wholly unruffled.

"I expected some such graceful attention from the machine," said he, "and I am not in the least troubled by it. You are a clever criminal lawyer, Robertson. But with all your cleverness you'll have a hard time dragging out any skeleton in *my* life, between this and to-morrow. And after that, it will be too late. For the Mullins bill will have been defeated."

"Don't be too sure I can't find the 'skeleton' in time. I get what I go after. And I'm going after *you*. I'll find that skeleton if it costs a million dollars to do it. I'll find it and drag it out of its smug hiding-place and rattle it before the whole grinning world. You've been in too many interests not to have gotten your rake-off somewhere. You've walked on too many smooth places not to have had your foot slip at least once. I'll find it. It's there and *I'll find it*. You say I'm a thief. Well, if I am, then the biggest men in this country are thieves."

"That is the first logical thing you've said," commented Standish. "Robertson, you're known as one of the foremost lawyers in New York. And, like many another great lawyer, you're using your genius to rob the people. I can't reform *you*. I wouldn't if I could. But I can and will reform the conditions that make you possible. I am already doing that. When the Mullins bill comes up tonight—"

"Never mind all that. I am not interested in your dreams of reform. When you first began to block our way I warned you we'd drive you out of politics. And we will. You don't seem to realize the mighty power that is against you. You've opposed us before. But never against big enough stakes to make it worth our while to turn the whole organization's resources into the effort at smashing you. Now that time's come. And you'll find we'll get you. We'll *get* you. It may take time, but we'll do it."

Standish's dark face broke into a smile. The red angry politician's threats seemed to strike within the insurgent some genuine chord of merriment.

"In that case, Governor Robertson," he said pleas-

antly, "I advise you to waste not one minute of time in setting to work. Because, though I've been able to upset several pet plans of yours during the past six years, you'll find everything I've done to you will be as mere child's play compared to what I'll do as soon as I'm in the speaker's chair."

"The speaker's chair!" roared Mark, diplomacy, caution, and even a cool fighting knowledge thrown to the four winds. "The speaker's chair! You'll never sit in it! Never in ten thousand years. Not if I have to—"

"Why, hello, boys!" drawled a voice from the doorway.

A man came leisurely down the stairs and laid one hand on Robertson's arm. Voice and action were calm, even pacific. Yet they slammed shut the New Yorker's floodgates of wrath and left him speechless, nervous, almost apologetic.

A hundred pairs of eyes from all parts of the long corridor turned as by occult attraction and fixed themselves in wide interest upon the newcomer.

CHAPTER V

JIM BLAKE

THE man whose advent in the Keswick corridor caused more attention among the loungers than would the arrival of a stage beauty, had at first glance little about him to justify such interest. He was long rather than tall, thin with a wiry compactness, and of a pleasant non-committal face. His age might have been fifty. But a closer glance at his half-shut eyes always gave an odd impression that they were fully a thousand years old. Perhaps this was why Jim Blake seldom opened them wide.

He had strolled in from the foyer as if he had not a care or an interest on earth. His expression as he had seen the trio of men in front of him had betokened no excitement. It was the gaze of a rather bored man at three casual acquaintances. His dry drawling voice, too, had been quite void of color. Yet his greeting and his friendly touch on Robert-

son's taut arm had been more effective in quieting the rising quarrel than would have been the charge of a police squad.

"Hello, boys," repeated Jim Blake, glancing genially and inexpressively from one to the other, from beneath his hanging lids. "Seemed to me I smelt something burning. How are you, Standish? What's up, Tom?"

"Why," answered Tom, vaguely embarrassed, "nothing very much. Just a little political discussion."

"So I gathered," yawned Blake. "Mark, you seemed to have been supplying the fireworks for it. I don't suppose it occurred to you that the whole surrounding landscape is fairly crawling with reporters? Nice little story for the morning papers, hey? *'High Words Between Speakership Aspirants in Keswick Lobby'*. And a half column more of what you both would have said if you'd said what the reporters thought maybe you *might* have said. Fine business. Especially at this time."

"He called me—" burst forth Mark.

"And you showed your hand?" hazarded Blake.

"Good poker, Mark. But punk politics. Standish," he went on, smiling benevolently upon the insurgent, "you two youngsters put me in mind of the time poor old Larry Connor and I were both running for sheriff. Out in Chicago. Back in the eighties. The names Larry and I called each other, in public, during that hectic little campaign would have set a canal-boat captain to saying his prayers. Real, juicy, man's-size, far-West line of insults. Gun-play talk. But not one atom of hard feeling behind it. Not a speck of it. I'd always do Larry a good turn, on the quiet, if I could, and he'd do the same by me. Then—"

"If you will excuse me—" began Standish courteously.

But Blake did not heed him. He had broken into a gentle reminiscent laugh like that of a child who recalls a wondrous Christmas tree.

"Poor old Larry!" Blake rambled on amusedly. "I sure got the joke on *him* before that campaign was over. I got the goods on him and I had him sent to the pen at Joliet for a full three-year stretch."

"And that strikes you as humorous?" asked Standish in disgust.

"Not a bit. It won me the election. That was all. The humorous part of it was that no one knew, but Larry and me, how all-fired near he came to sending *me* to the pen instead. If the district attorney had happened to be his man instead of mine—Oh, poor Larry could never get over that part of it. Just about broke his heart, I guess. For he didn't do a thing but die before his prison term was up. Funny, wasn't it? When you stop to think it might just as well have been I, instead."

"Screamingly funny," said Standish gravely. "But I'm afraid we take things a little more seriously nowadays, Mr. Blake."

"I know you do," agreed Blake. "That's why you earnest young men—captains of industry and reformers and other leaders—never have any appetites and why you look sixty before you are forty. And, speaking of appetite, Mark; I'm afraid we're keeping Mr. Standish from his dinner."

"Good night," replied Standish, taking the broad hint with no show of feeling.

"Good night—till the house meets at ten o'clock," said Blake. "I suppose you'll lead your gallant insurgent cohorts in person this evening?"

"Yes."

"Don't want to call it off and come into the fold again, I s'pose?" suggested Blake quizzically.

"No, thanks," smiled the insurgent, and passed on toward the dining-room.

Jim Blake watched Standish out of ear-shot, from between drowsy lids. But his eyes had a queer little glint in them as he turned to face Robertson.

"Now then, Mark," he said with the mildly reproachful air of an overindulgent teacher whose pupils have been caught skylarking during lesson hours, "look here! What's the sense of my working my hands to the bone and thinking the hair off my scalp, to boost you into the speaker's chair? What's the use, I say, if you're going to blow up and make toad pie of everything, the first minute my back's turned? I gave you credit once for having a few grains of political sense. But every time you come within shouting distance of that man Standish, you make

a wall-eyed idiot of yourself. Lord! I like a good criminal, but I sure hate a fool."

Mark reddened, and he answered half timidly:

"I know it was bad politics. But a man has to be human once in a century. I feel like running amuck every time I see Standish. Besides," he went on in eager boyish self-defense that sat ill on his imposing personality, "he's hurt you just as much as he's hurt me."

"Quite so," assented Blake. "He's a clever boy. And that's why you don't see me scattering gunpowder and lighted matches all over the shop when I meet him. It's risky. And you, too, Tom," he interrupted himself, turning abruptly on his son, "you stood by, I take it, and never did a thing to stop Mark. Haven't I brought you up better than to keep your mouth and your hands out of commission while your own brother-in-law is acting like a year-old bull-pup and making hash of his own chances? Hey? Oh, I'll never be able to teach you boys politics. You'll both keep right on disgracing me. There's nothing in the Bible about the bone-

headedness of the children being visited on the fathers. And I don't see why I should have been picked out as the goat. Hello, Van Dyke!" he broke off as the lawyer, with Neligan and Gregg in tow, came along the corridor toward them, from the bar. "What brings *you* to Washington? What's up?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," answered Van Dyke, shaking hands with Blake and instinctively leading the way to the adjacent amen corner. "What *is* up? You're supposed to be managing this fight, Jim. And here we find ourselves in the very worst hole we've been in since ninety-seven. You seem to have let this Standish chap win every single trick in the game so far, without so much as playing such cards as you surely must have in your hand. If you and I hadn't fought shoulder to shoulder for years and years, I'd be tempted to say you were lying down."

Neligan's brow knitted. Even Robertson glanced wrathfully at the New York lawyer who dared address the mighty house leader as though the latter were a lazy office boy. Jim Blake alone remained quite undisturbed. Thoughtfully he drew forth a

very long cigar, bit off its end, stuck it in one corner of his thin-lipped mouth, lighted it, shook out the match, picked out the most comfortable chair in sight and lounged into it.

"Yes," he drawled at last, "you *might* say I was 'lying down'. But I notice you don't."

"Of course I don't," agreed Van Dyke with suspicious eagerness. "But—but—the crowd down on Broadway doesn't like the way you've let the house get out of control. And—"

"The crowd down on Broadway," answered Blake, "have handed us a raw proposition in this Mullins bill. The bill smells so rank that even the dear, dear public have got a whiff of it. And when the public *does* get its sense of smell into good working order—Oh, what's the use, Van Dyke? You can see what we're up against. You know the temper of the country. We can't even defend that bill of yours. And this is no time to put over such a raw one. It's like experimenting with gasoline the day after your insurance has lapsed. We'll have to fall back on talking about the 'Grand Old Party' or—"

"Still," argued Van Dyke, "you said you'd be able

to put the deal through. And there's surely enough in it for us all."

"I said I could put it through. And I could—when we started. But Standish wasn't fighting it then. This isn't the Bill versus the People. It's Mat Standish versus the Organization. And Standish has the people—the *waked*-up people—behind him. He's their idol. He's the parsons' pet. They look on him as the Worthy Young Man who couldn't do wrong if he tried and who isn't wicked enough to try. In other words, he's never been found out. There's only two classes of men that I ever met—the sort that have been found out and the sort that haven't. If we can damage Standish in the eyes of the people—if we can make the clergy repudiate him—"

"That's just the point," cried Van Dyke. "Why haven't you been able to do that, instead of sitting peacefully to one side and waiting for him to wreck himself? He's no fool. Do you expect him to play into your hands by robbing a poor-box or writing a Black Hand letter, now while the eyes of the whole country are bulged out watching him?"

"We've had detectives on him," put in Neligan. "I told you all that, Van Dyke."

"Detectives?" snorted the lawyer. "What good is that? Your detectives will charge you seven dollars a day and expenses—mostly expenses—for giving you a full report of the way Standish spends the day and what he has to eat and the number of cigars he smokes and the addresses of some of the letters he writes. You'll never get Standish that way. If ever he's broken a law—and most men have—"

"Oh, not so many," gently contradicted Blake. "Two jails would be plenty large to hold all the folks who have broken any law. And the two jails could be built real easy—just by running a high wall around the equator. But you're right in one thing, Van Dyke. We'll never get Standish in the way these boys have been going about it. So, it's lucky I happened to put a man of my own on the job."

"What?"

"Yes. While I've been 'lying down', as you call it."

"I didn't say you had been—"

"No. But you thought it. Just because I don't run around in circles, barking, and now and then biting a piece out of the ceiling, you folks think I'm doing nothing. And I'll never teach you any better."

"But—"

"Oh, yes. I put a man of my own on to Standish's record. I told him not to bother about anything that had happened during the last three or four years. *Your* men would be busy on that; and there'd be nothing to find, anyhow. Standish has been too much in the lime-light during that time. So I set my man to scratching up ancient history. I told him to go back and back and back, in Standish's record; and to keep on going back till he found something."

"Well?" chorused the others as Blake paused and searched his clothes with maddening slowness for a match.

"Well," drawled Blake, "he's found it."

"No?" chuckled Neligan, wildly elated.

"Best news of the year!" laughed Robertson, gleefully gripping his strong hands together.

"What was it?" demanded Van Dyke. "What has your man found?"

"He has found the past, gentlemen," replied Blake. "The great and glorious if somewhat regrettable past. The past is the place where we've all made our mistakes. And the past is the place to look for their record. It took my man some time. But he's landed it. I didn't get the story from him till half an hour ago. That's why I'm so late. He—"

"What has Standish done?" insisted Van Dyke. "What is the story?"

"The story is long," said Blake; "but I can shorten it up considerably for you. Along about five years ago friend Standish fell in love with a girl. Right sort of a girl, you know. Good family. Father rich and all that. Standish wasn't very well-off—he was always honest, you know. And he and she were going to get married on the quiet and keep their marriage secret until—"

"Is that all?" grunted Van Dyke in dire disappointment. "There's no campaign story in that."

"No? Maybe there's one in what's coming. I drew the facts out of his former secretary. And I used hundred-dollar bills as corkscrews to do it. I'm

not the sort of man who spends perfectly good soft money just to learn about a three-pictures-to-the-page Robert Chambers love story. There's more to come."

"Go on!" begged Van Dyke, subsiding.

"She and Standish were going to be married secretly, just as I told you. But she had to go to Europe. And for some reason or other—the secretary didn't know why and it doesn't matter, anyhow—the wedding was sidetracked. Instead, they took a notion to run off to a little country hotel, for one of those honeymoons that—that never came through the custom-house."

"No!"

"Yes. And, as an afterthought, yes, again. I can show you the hotel register with—"

"The fool didn't register under his own name, did he?" demanded Gregg, from a newly-acquired worldly wisdom which he assuredly had not brought with him from Kansas.

"No," said Blake. "Registered under the name of Fowler. But any handwriting expert can prove he wrote it, and the hotel manager can swear Stand-

ish was the man. The manager is ready to swear Standish called the woman his wife, too."

"Oh, the jay!" grinned Gregg, the worldling.

"You see," went on Blake, "he really expected to marry her. They were just taking time by the forelock. And then—here's the queerest tangle of all—after that week there, it seems she backed out and wouldn't marry him at all. No, Gregg, it wasn't *he* that threw *her* over. That happens in the 'Town-Hall-To-night' shows, out in Kansas, I know. And sometimes, maybe, in real life. But this was the other way around. The Woman jilted him and went back to her family. One week of Standish was about all she was up to. And she balked at making a life job of it. I don't wonder."

"But didn't her family find out?"

"It seems not. They thought she had been away visiting a girl friend in the country. She got home safe, and everything looked proper as a rainy Sunday in a graveyard. Some women sure have luck."

"But," asked Gregg, "how did the secretary find out?"

Blake laughed indulgently at the artless question.

"Son," said he, "the man who thinks he can fool his secretary had better try it sometime."

"Go on," urged Van Dyke.

"That's about all," finished Blake. "She woke up, as I told you, to find it was all-a-mistake-and-no-harm-done-thank-heaven. And as far as I can make out, they haven't seen each other since. I won't swear to that part of it. But if they have, his secretary doesn't know it. Nor—"

"Who was the Woman?" queried Robertson.

"That," answered Blake reluctantly, "is the one thing left to find out."

"But, good lord!" exploded Van Dyke. "That's the one thing we *must* know. The story's worthless without her name. No one would believe it. It would sound like one of the good old political lies that nobody listens to nowadays."

"Doesn't the secretary know who she is?" asked Robertson.

"He says not. The correspondence was signed by initial and—"

"It's my opinion," said Gregg wisely, "the secretary's holding out on you for a bigger price."

"Price!" snorted Blake. "Not he. I offered him a price that sounded like a page from the history of the Standard Oil Company. No. He doesn't know."

Van Dyke fairly groaned.

"Then," he demanded, "how is this miserable story going to help us?"

"Oh," replied Blake, "the net's closing around her. I hope to have her name to-night."

"To-night! We've *got* to have it to-night. Before the Mullins bill comes up. The name's no use to us after that."

"But," asked Robertson, "even if we *do* get it to-night, what use can we make of it? The house will be on the final debate of the bill by ten o'clock. By making use of every trick we know, we can fix only a few hours' delay at most. What good—?"

"What good?" retorted Blake. "Just this: Standish's long suit is morality. A lot of us have had smirches on our names from time to time. *He* never has. So the clergy are for him and the people swear by him. It's his chief pull with both church and public. *Now*—if we can get this story, properly authenticated, on the floor of the house to-night,

it'll give a lot of men—Gregg, here, for instance—an excuse to swing over to us."

"That's right!" cried Gregg, in sudden comprehension. "My constituents can't expect me to support a man of abandoned moral character. If Standish is really such a blackguard I'll be doing the country a service by backing any bill he opposes. That's right. And there are dozens of others who will see it as I do. My, but this takes a load off my mind! Anybody got any eating tobacco?"

"It will bring so many men over to us," continued Blake, unheeding, "that we'll be strong enough to force another adjournment. And during that same adjournment we can get this story scattered all over the country. It'll force Standish out of politics. And then we can pass the Mullins bill at our leisure."

"You're right! You're always right!" approved Robertson. "The public won't stand for an immoral man leading a moral reform. I don't see why not; but it won't. 'Conventionality, that shrieks by day at what it does by night!' "

"The public will let dyspeptics cook its dinners, and tone-deaf men criticize its music, and failures

write its Guides to Success," supplemented Blake. "But it won't stand for its interests being represented in the government by a man whose life isn't a Christian Endeavor tract. Mention a woman's name in connection with a statesman and he may as well put up the shutters. Look how the Mrs. O'Shea story put Parnell out of parliament, and how near a dead-and-gone affair with a woman came to making the greatest statesman since Lincoln lose the presidential election. Oh, there are hundreds of such cases. And Standish's will be just one more. People don't vote for principles. They vote for personalities. We'll make Standish the laughing-stock of Washington. He'll be driven so far out of politics that he'll discover a new street. And all because he couldn't foresee five years ago that he might some day need to use his past in his business. The people won't stand for his leadership three minutes after they learn about the Woman."

"'Who rules o'er freemen'," grandiloquently quoted Gregg from his store of hard-learned campaign phrases, "'should himself be free!'"

"'Who drives fat oxen should himself be fat',"

followed Blake. "And the man who thinks he's planted his past is likely some day to acquire a fine healthy belief in ghosts."

"Oh, we've got him! We've *got* him!" muttered Robertson once more, his usually quick mind loafing blissfully over the single grand idea.

"Yes," amended Van Dyke dryly, "we've got him—if we can get the Woman's name in time. It all depends on that. Without it, our story is worthless. Thus far, it seems, no one knows her name."

"Except Standish," corrected Blake.

"What good does that do us? He won't tell."

"What one man knows," returned Blake sententiously, "another can find out."

"And," put in Gregg, lowering his voice, "speaking of 'finding out', reminds me. That little devil of a telephone girl over there— Do you suppose she could have heard anything we've been saying?"

"If she has a whole pair of ears," answered Blake, sinking his own voice, "she surely could. Especially what *I've* been saying. For I've been straining my voice to talk loud enough for her to catch what I said, ever since we sat down here."

"The deuce you have?" exclaimed Van Dyke. "What for?"

"For the same reason I've been 'lying down'," returned Blake. "Don't worry over that. A man whose voice is as tired as mine isn't straining that throat unless it's for a good cause. And you can leave the finding of the Woman's name to me, too, I guess. Now trot along, all of you. Mark, go in and order dinner. I'll be there in five minutes. I've a couple of things to attend to first. You'll join us, Neligan?"

"No, thanks, Jim. I had the best part of dinner in there at the bar just now. And I'm content for a while to chew on the good news you've given us."

"Yes," smiled Van Dyke. "That *is* something we can get our teeth into. I was beginning to think Standish was really sound to the core, as you said he was."

"No man is," sneered Robertson. "At least none I've ever met in politics. This story will make some of Standish's preacher friends sit up and take notice, I fancy. And if we get the Mullins bill through the house, the senate is easy."

"Yes," said Blake, "the senate is easy. But it is not on the free list. The high cost of living has put senators up, along with other necessaries. Hey, Van Dyke? They cut into dividends terribly, don't they?"

The group began to drift across the corridor in the direction of the dining-room. Blake detached himself from the rest and started back toward the telephone switchboard. But Tom, noting his father's move, intercepted him. The young fellow's face looked worried and his manner had lost some of its wonted buoyancy.

"Dad," he said.

"Hey?" asked Blake, stopping and turning toward his son.

Reading Tom's face, as he was accustomed by instinct to read every countenance that came into his range of notice, Jim nodded and led the way to the amen corner.

"Now, then," he demanded, half-guyingly, half-anxiously, "what's on *your* mind? Speak up, son. There never yet was a delicate subject that wasn't the better for getting aired."

CHAPTER VI

A FAMILY ROW

"THIS—this story about Standish,"—began Tom uncomfortably; then paused involuntarily as Blake leaned back with a grunt of relief.

"That all?" asked the father. "I was afraid I was going to get another call-down from my wise son on my follies and sins. Honestly, Tom, I don't know how I ever got through the first quarter-century of my life without your holy guidance and correction."

"Is that quite necessary?" said Tom. "I only wanted to ask you—"

"Of course you did. You wanted to ask me some question in politics. And instead of being glad that you are beginning to show an intelligent interest in my affairs at last, I made fun of you. I'm sorry, son. I'm an old crank. Go ahead with your question. You were asking about this Standish story?"

"Yes. I suppose it will give us the fight."

"Looks that way from where I sit," replied Blake. "Such pretty romances have wrecked many a man as strong as Standish—and stronger. Folks kind of like to show their own goodness by denouncing things of that sort and by crucifying men and women—women especially—who put conventionality in second place instead of first. If a man robs a bank or a woman has chronic cleptomania, the world will overlook it after a while. But the world never forgives or forgets when a woman makes such a break as this girl of Standish's did. It forgives the man—as long as he stays in private life. But, once let him lift his head above the crowd and—then look out for the moral brickbats to come a-flying! That's what's coming to friend Standish in the next few hours."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom, almost shuddering, "I wish you wouldn't do this thing."

"What thing?" queried the father, perplexed at his son's sudden vehemence.

"I wish you wouldn't use blackmail to win your fight."

"Blackmail?" echoed Blake slowly.

Then he paused. The rugged mask of a face had not changed. But the pupils of the half-shut eyes had suddenly contracted as though a blinding light had been flashed before them. Yet, a second later, when Blake spoke again, there was no trace of pain or resentment in his dry drawling voice.

"Blackmail?" he said once more. "How about the way Standish dragged up that franchise affair of mine last year? What was that but blackmail?"

"Well," demanded Tom, in the stark mercilessness of youth, "you *were* stealing the franchise, weren't you, dad?"

"Yes," asserted Blake with a delightful absence of all false modesty, "I sure was. And I was doing it neatly, too. Not a ripple, not a kick, till Standish butted in with his measly reformers and queered the whole job and cost us a half million dollars. Son, every time I think of that, I want to chase some one with an ax. What in blazes is the use of a man's wasting time and genius and cash in framing up a dandy deal like that, if a Hurrah-for-Reform crowd is going to sail in and spoil it all? I don't lie awake nights thinking how cunning our

friend Standish would look with seaweed in his hair and sand under his nails. But I keep that franchise memory and a few others fresh on the ice. And it sure doesn't break my heart to have a chance now of getting back at him."

"But," persisted Tom, "that was a public matter. It doesn't justify you in dragging his private life into the lime-light."

"The deuce it doesn't? Who told you that?"

"My self-respect."

"Oh! I thought maybe you might have got the tip from some reliable source. Go ahead, son. Doesn't justify me, hey?"

"No, dad, if you want the truth, it doesn't. It isn't—clean!"

"Clean? Say, son, this is politics. Not a prayer-meeting. You've got in the wrong pew."

"If the right pew justifies dirty work like that," flashed the boy, "I'm glad I have. And I want to stay there. This business of making political capital of a man's dead-and-buried sins is enough to turn the stomach of a camel. A thousand times more so when one considers the Woman."

"Well," queried Blake, in high good humor, as he always was when he could stir up a quarrel between his adored only son and himself. "What about *her.*"

"She's a *woman.* And—"

"Sure she is. Did you suppose I mistook her for a Senegambian chimpanzee? Of course she's a woman. That's what makes the story worth while."

"That's what makes the story damnable!" retorted Tom. "Don't you understand, dad? She is a woman and—"

"So you said before," answered Blake wearily. "To save argument, I'll waive all objections and admit the point. She's a woman. Now go ahead. What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything. She made a fool of herself. Presumably when she was young. She has probably repented it bitterly, ten thousand times. She may have atoned for what she did. She may even be a wife and mother, now. Respected, loved. All the world and Heaven, besides, to her husband and children. And, just to pass a rotten railroad bill, you are going to drag her out into the glare of the news-

paper world and crucify her! You are going to strip from her her husband's love; you are going to make her friends shun her as an outcast; you're throwing black shame on her innocent children's name. You are—"

"Excuse me, son," interrupted Blake. "But I'm not doing a single one of those terribly dramatic things. Standish is doing it—or, rather, he *has* done it. Not *I*. Catch the idea? If Standish committed a murder and I found the body, would you call *me* a murderer? Hey? Well, that's what has happened this time. When Standish took the lady on that little left-handed wedding trip, five years ago in March, he rendered her liable to all that and worse. A man doesn't think of such things at the time. Neither does a woman, I guess. This one sure didn't, or she'd never have thrown over her one hope of safety by jilting him."

"But that doesn't—"

"Doesn't make *me* any less at fault? Maybe so. Maybe not. I'm not losing sleep in worrying. Say, Tom, that was a great little oration you just handed me about all the things that are due to happen to the

Woman when we spring this story. I didn't make any mistake in having you study law. You sure can talk plenty hectic when you have to. Like a ten-twent-thirt hero. Only louder."

"You can guy me all you like," said Tom, flushing hotly. "But the fact remains: you've no right to make this unknown Woman's heart a stepping-stone to your victory."

"I'm not going to 'make this unknown Woman's heart' all those things. I'm going to wait till I know who she is. And that's going to be in the next hour. Afterward, Mr. Standish will take up a graceful and conspicuous position in the pillory."

"Oh, it is so vile—so—!"

"We must take what Providence gives us," smirked Blake with sanctimonious unction; adding briskly, "and be thankful to get it. Why, if Standish licks us now, Tom, we're goners. The whole bunch of us. Why, boy, you don't realize how much there is to this fight! It's not only the Mullins bill that's at stake. It's the control of the whole party organization. If once Standish gets us going, we might just as well pack and start back for Illinois.

It's good night to *my* political life and to yours, too, Tom. And Mark's and—"

"Better go back clean than stay here to—"

"Oh, cut out the sentiment! Save it for the district attorney's office or for stump speeches. 'Go back,' hey? Not Jim Blake. I haven't been a big figure in the house for fifteen years to be licked by a youngster like Standish. Blackmail, is it? In politics, all is fair—and then some. If you don't think so, drop out. The organization papers won't exactly go into mourning borders for your loss, sonny."

"Listen, dad," returned Tom, choking back a hot answer. "Ever since you brought me here into the thick of the fight, you and I haven't agreed about politics. But I've stood with you, through and through. I've worked hard for the party, because I felt I was working for *you*. But—well—this time I'd rather be working for the other side. Because I believe they're right and we are wrong."

"Well, then," blazed his father, in a dry gust of unwonted wrath, "why don't you work for the other side? Go ahead! It's no great loss to us."

"You know perfectly well why I don't. It's because you are on this side—the wrong side just now."

"Go over to them!" snapped Blake, his rare anger still unspent. "They'd be glad enough to get you. Not that you'd be worth a hoot in hell to them in actual value. But the fact that you're the worthy son of your unworthy blackmailing father would make you welcome. Go ahead! Lord, but I wonder what I ever did in the old days to be punished by having a canting reformer for a son! This is what I get for putting you in the district attorney's office and trying to make a he-man of you and— Well, why don't you go over to them?"

"Because," answered Tom, growing cooler in ratio to his father's increasing heat, "only because I'd be fighting against *you,* dad. And I'd sooner be at your side in a crooked game than against you in a straight one. You know what I think of machine politics. And when I go over to the other side, I want you to come with me."

"Me?" shrilled Blake, aghast. *"Me?* Want me

to work against the old party? Why, boy, if you had a little more sense you'd be half-witted. The party's been father and mother to me. And when I leave the party, I'll—I'll take it with me."

"You might just as well," observed Tom. "It seems to belong to you all right. It must, when you can make it stand for this—this—"

" 'Blackmail' was the word you used, I think," supplied Blake, as his son hesitated. " 'Blackmail' was the word. And 'dirty work' and—"

"Dad! I—"

"Oh, don't hesitate!" laughed Blake mirthlessly. "I'm only your father."

"Don't!" begged Tom. "Oh, dad, why do you and I always get into a scrap every time we try to talk seriously? You pretend to think I'm a fool. But at heart you know I'm not. And I get riled at the things you say. But, deep inside, I know you're the dandiest whitest father that ever came down the pike. We're fonder of each other, in a way, than either of us is of any one else. Yet, we always quarrel, at the drop of the hat. I wonder why."

"I s'pose," replied Blake, touched more deeply

than he dared show, yet too stubborn to let so goodly a supply of paternal anger be dissipated all at once, "I s'pose it's because I'm too old or too stupid to learn the new fashion of having children instruct their parents what to do and what not to do."

"Just as you say," answered Tom with a philosophic shrug of the shoulders. "Good night."

"Where are you off to, now?" grunted Blake indifferently, albeit there was a glint of wistfulness in the half-shut, steely old eyes.

"To the club. To dinner," said Tom, moving away.

"To the club, hey?" growled Blake, detaining him. "Huh! Afraid it'll hurt your spotless reputation to be seen dining here with a 'blackmailer'?"

"You have a positive genius for choosing the rottenest, most disagreeable thing to say," remarked Tom; and there was a note of hurt in his voice that somehow reached the far-hidden and tortuous recesses where Jim Blake's battered old heart was supposed to be.

"Well," vouchsafed the father grumpily, "maybe that was just a trifle swift. Look here, lad," he

went on, a soft, almost tender tone creeping into his dry voice, as he laid his hand on Tom's shoulder, "I'm the only father you've got. And you may as well make the best of it."

"You're the only father I want, dad. But—"

"There! There!" hastily admonished Blake. "Don't go spoiling it with 'buts'! You know what you are to me, boy. I guess I don't need to get mush-headed and try to tell you. And—and," he repeated, hiding his momentary tenderness under a cloud of made-to-order impatience, "that's why I hate to see you loading up your alleged brain with these fool ideas about—"

"Let it go at that, dad," laughed Tom.

"Oh, all right. I will, if you like. And you'll stay to dinner?"

"Why, of course," quickly assented Tom.

"That's better," approved Blake. "Now, run in and start with Mark. I'll be with you in a minute or two. And—say—if Mark and I should get to talking politics at dinner—"

"Don't worry," returned Tom, smiling. "I'm getting quite used to my muzzle. But Mark won't

be as likely to be wrapped up in politics as he usually is. Grace is coming down."

"No!" cried Blake, his face alight with pleasure. "Good for her! When?"

"At eight o'clock. But she didn't bother to mention whether it was eight this evening or eight tomorrow morning. Mark was just going to call her up on long distance to find out, when we happened to meet Standish. And I suppose the prospect of a clash with Standish quite drove a minor matter like his wife out of his thoughts."

"You're wrong there," dissented Blake. "There's nothing on earth can drive Grace out of Mark Robertson's head. He's as crazy in love with her as he was the day he married her. If he didn't telephone her before he went in to dinner it's a cinch he'll do it the minute he comes out. He wouldn't miss the chance of meeting her at the train for a small fortune. Queer old Mark! Grace is the one thing that makes him human. Chase on in, and order for me."

Dismissing his son with a slap on the shoulder, Blake strode across to the telephone alcove. Wanda

Kelly looked up inquiringly from the novel she was reading between telephone calls.

"Miss Kelly," said Jim, "will you kindly connect me with the hotel office?"

He sprawled into a vacant seat at her side, caught up the extra receiver and called:

"That the office? Perry? Hello, Perry. This is Blake. Jim Blake. Yes. In two minutes I want you to send word to Mr. Standish that he's wanted on the phone here. Yes. *Here.* Not in his room. Here at the phone booths. Fix it any way you like. Only get him here inside of five minutes. No, no! Do as I say, I tell you. Good-by."

He hung up the receiver, rose and stood lounging against the rail, looking down at Wanda from between his half-closed lids.

"Now, then, Miss Kelly," he began abruptly.

"Yes, Mr. Blake?" she interrogated as he paused.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRAP

FOR a moment Blake did not answer. Nor could Wanda read anything from his utterly expressionless face. Then he said:

"Do you know why I did that?"

"Probably," replied Wanda gravely, "because you wanted Mr. Standish to come here."

He eyed her searchingly. But her face gave no sign that her reply had been intended as impertinence. She was looking up at him with an innocence that any one better acquainted with Wanda Kelly would have recognized as quite preternatural.

"H'm!" he vouchsafed. "You're a bright girl."

"Thank you, sir," she replied demurely.

Again he glanced at her moveless features in quick doubt. Then, evidently making up his mind, he went on:

"You heard the story I was telling those men

over there? The story about Standish and the Woman?"

"I—I happened to catch part of it."

"You happened to catch every word of it," he corrected. "And now, why do you suppose I told such an all-important secret loud enough for a telephone girl to hear it?"

"That's just what I've been wondering," she said frankly. "But I can't figure it out."

"Then I'll tell you," retorted Blake, nodding approval at her unembarrassed candor. "What's the one thing we need to turn that story from a windy piece of campaign gossip into the deadliest weapon ever forged in Washington?"

"The Woman's name," replied Wanda, at once.

"Good!" applauded Blake. "You've got a real brain under that metal receiver you wear. You seem to have this situation worked out as clear as I have. Maybe, now, you can guess what that Woman's name is worth to us. How about it?"

Wanda rolled her big eyes ceilingward after the manner of a stupid child who seeks in space the answer to a teacher's question.

"Maybe—maybe a—a million dollars," she hazarded timidly, at length.

Blake grinned appreciation of the bit of acting, and was not in the very least deceived by it—as Wanda had perfectly well known he would not be.

"Nothing stingy about your ideas, young lady!" he commented. "Maybe I'd better put them straight. Do you want to make a hundred dollars?"

"A hundred dollars?" she echoed in a wide-eyed wonder of innocence that Saint Cecelia at her best could not possibly have equaled. "A whole hundred dollars? Why, how could a poor telephone operator like me make so much money?"

Again Blake's eyes narrowed. And again the grim smile twitched his lip corners.

"How could you make so much?" he repeated. "In the easiest way in the world. Just by telling me a phone number that you hear."

"Oh, Mr. Blake!" protested Wanda, indescribably shocked. "Is it possible you don't know it's against the rules of the company to tell—?"

"No," he snapped. "It isn't possible I don't know. And it isn't possible I don't know that ten hello

girls out of eight break that rule a dozen times a day. I want to get a certain telephone number."

Wanda reached uncertainly for the telephone directory that hung beside her. Then, apparently seeing she had misunderstood Blake, she looked up again with a helpless little laugh.

"You'll have to be a bit plainer, Mr. Blake," said she. "I don't quite understand."

"Here's the idea," replied Blake, wearying of matching a cudgel against a hatpin, and coming straight to the pith of the matter. "I've sent for Standish to come here because I want to have a talk with him. When I'm through, I'll go away. And the chances are that he'll go straight to the telephone and call up some one. It's that 'some one's' number I want."

"Oh!" exclaimed Wanda, smiling brightly at her own comprehension. "And that's worth a hundred dollars?"

"Yes. And if you can hear what he says on the phone I'll make it two hundred."

For an instant the innocent wondering smile

again illumined Wanda's upturned face. Then, like Blake, she evidently wearied of futile word-fencing, for she said, incisively:

"I see. I've got the idea. You'll spring this story of the Woman on him. You'll make him think you've almost got her in your net. You'll try to scare him into hustling to the nearest telephone and warning her. He'll know you're having him watched. So he won't dare to go to her in person with his warning or send her a letter. He's got too much sense for that. And a telegram would be too risky. So nothing's left but the phone. He'll call her up. You'll get the number. And then it'll be a cinch for your men to find the Woman's name in no time, and all about her. The full story—names and all—can be circulated on the floor as soon as the house sits, to-night. And good-by then to Mr. Standish."

"Say!" drawled Blake in genuine admiration. "You've sure got a brain. We'll have to get you in the secret service. Or, if you want a job in my office at double what you're getting here—but we can talk about all that afterward. Will—?"

"Oh!" pleaded Wanda with a bewildering return to her former sweet innocence. "Can't we talk about it *now?*"

"No!" rapped out Blake. "We can't. There's no time. He'll be here any minute. Will you do what I ask?"

"You're sure the number will give you the clue to the Woman?"

"Absolutely."

"And don't you think one little hundred dollars is a pretty cheap price to pay for information that will bring you millions?"

Sheer innocence had reached its towering acme—the summit whereon rests pure wisdom. Blake regarded the girl from under his bushy brows. But her face, in its different way, was as unreadable as his own.

"Well?" he demanded, "if a 'whole hundred dollars' has shrunk so quickly into a 'little hundred dollars,' what price strikes you as fair?"

"Let's see!" pondered innocence's fair apostle, "how about ten thousand dollars?"

"Ten thousand dollars?" shouted Blake, thrown

for once off his monumental balance. "Are you crazy?"

"My head *has* felt a little queer sometimes," she confided, "but I've always supposed it was from sitting so close to the amen corner. Maybe if I went to a doctor—"

"Ten thousand dollars!" repeated Blake. "Rot! Ten thousand dollars for—for one measly telephone number!"

"No!" contradicted Wanda, and her voice and face were like chilled steel, "for a victory that saves your leadership of the machine, that puts your son-in-law in the speaker's chair, that smashes your enemy and that means millions of dollars to you! That's what the telephone number means to you, Mr. Blake. That and a man's career—a woman's shame—a girl's self-respect. Throw all that into the balance and the price won't look so fancy."

"You're rating self-respect pretty high," retorted Blake, though rather pleased than otherwise by her quick grasp of the situation. "I could buy half a state legislature for ten thousand dollars."

"Perhaps you could. You ought to know. But if

you want *me* to be your spy, you must pay me spy's wages. And such spies as Wanda Kelly aren't on the free list, Mr. Blake, any more than senators are. The work is well worth ten thousand dollars—and more."

"My dear young lady," counseled Blake with his most fatherly air, "believe me when I warn you that there is such a thing as being just a trifle too ambitious. Women don't realize that. But it's so. And that's why women have never got far in politics. Still, there's no time to argue. Standish ought to be here by now. Shall we say a thousand dollars?"

"I—I'll have to think it over," said Wanda confusedly. "And, anyway," she added, "there's no use making a price till I've got what you want, is there? Besides," with an easy lapse into sweet innocence, "Mr. Standish seems to be such a nice man. It's a pity to—"

"Oh, he's a nice man," laughed Blake. "Hell's full of 'nice men'. But there's no time, now, to haggle about prices. You get that number for me, and you won't lose by it. And every word you can

overhear is worth a three-carat diamond. Steady, there! He's coming."

Standish came toward the switchboard, from the dining-room whither a page had at last tracked him. He saw a most unruffled telephone girl absorbed in a novel. Jim Blake was leaning negligently against the switchboard rail, looking with dreamy half-shut eyes along the nearly-deserted corridor. Standish hurried across to Wanda.

"Some one wants me on the phone?" he asked.

"No," drawled Blake, before the girl could reply. "Some one wants you over there in the amen corner for a minute or two, if you can spare the time. I took the liberty of sending that message about your being wanted on the phone, because," leading the way to the amen corner, "I have a matter of private business to talk over with you."

"Private business?" echoed the puzzled Standish, instinctively following Blake to the corner. "Private business? Between you and me?"

"Quite so," assented Blake, "although I s'pose I shouldn't be talking to you about this. I don't know what the boys would say if they knew I was blab-

bing," he continued guiltily. "But—oh, hang it all, you're a decent sort of chap, Standish, if you *do* happen to be a rank insurgent! And I don't want to ruin any man's life without giving him at least a chance to save himself. Lord, but Jim Blake's softening as old age comes on! And the softening seems to have begun at the top. Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks," declined Standish curtly. "Will you please explain why you have sent for me?"

Blake looked at him with gentle pity, then shook his head.

"My boy," said he, "the game is up."

"Please be more explicit. I don't care for mysteries."

"The game is up," repeated Blake. "The whole show is over. We've found out all about that pretty little affair of five years ago."

"What affair?" asked Standish, unmoved. "Please explain. My time is limited."

"If you're referring to your time in politics, it is. It ends to-night. There! There! Don't get huffy. You've got nerve all right. I grant you that. 'What affair', hey? Why, the affair with the Woman

whom you registered as your wife, under the name of Fowler, at a country hotel up in New York state. That's all. Hardly worth mentioning, hey?"

As he had talked, Blake had let his gaze wander over the ceiling, the walls—anywhere except at Matthew Standish. Yet he had missed not one detail of the younger man's expression. There was nothing, however, to be read in that expression. Standish's heavy face was mask-like, blank, save for a faint tinge of polite bewilderment.

But Blake was far too wise a reader of men to go by the sign in a face. He let his mildly wandering glance shift, as if by accident, to Standish's hands. They were tight-clenched. So tight that the knuckles showed white from the convulsive pressure.

"Another campaign yarn," smiled Standish, and his voice was as inexpressive as his face. "Isn't it rather old-fashioned to spring lies of that sort? The public doesn't stand for them nowadays. Proofs are needed."

"Really?" drawled Blake. "Why, Standish, sometimes your knowledge of up-to-date conditions simply dazzles me. That's what it does. *Dazzles* me."

"And now—" pursued Standish, turning to go.

"And now," echoed Blake, "we've got you with the goods. Don't bluff, man. No bluff ever won a penny after the cards were laid face upward. And they're face upward now. You know what I mean. And you know we've got you dead to rights. Five years ago you spent a week with a woman at a hotel whose proprietor can and will identify you. Any expert can swear that the registered name, 'Fowler,' is in your handwriting. It was in March. Congress was still in session. But you gave out word that you'd gone to the mountains to rest. We've got the dates. We've got every fact proved. Man, can't you see I'm trying to help you? Give me a chance to."

Standish, his face still a mask, was staring at the floor. At last he raised his eyes—the dark tired eyes in whose depths Self and Love and Happiness had so long ago burned out. And, turning to Blake, he said evenly:

"So you have dug all that up, have you? I might have expected it. In fact I *have* expected it. But it hasn't worried me. Because you can't harm me with such a story."

"No?" asked Blake, with real interest. "Why not?"

"You know perfectly well why not," answered Standish, "the story won't amount to the paper you would print it on unless you can supply the name of the Woman. And you can't do that."

"Are you so sure."

"Perfectly," said Standish.

And, Blake, a little to his own wonder, noticed that Standish's hands were now lying loose and that there was no sign of tension in his somewhat ungainly frame.

"What makes you think we can't supply the Woman's name?" demanded Blake. "What makes you think we haven't found her?"

"Because," began Standish; then he checked himself and said somewhat lamely, "because—I have good reasons for *knowing* you haven't."

"H'm! Still keep as close in touch with her as all that? Mark's detectives must be foolish-house graduates. Well, I'll admit we haven't found her—*yet.* But we will before midnight. You left some pretty easy clues and they're being followed. That's the

trouble with a man who has something to hide. He'll lock and double-bar nine doors to discovery; and leave the tenth wide open with a 'Welcome' sign over it. And that's just what *you* did. I was a trifle late in striking the trail. Otherwise I'd have headed you off, before. But by twelve o'clock to-night we'll have her. Why, son," he went on, noting Standish's half-smile of incredulity, "if I wasn't dead sure of getting her, would I be such a fool as to tell you all this? And whatever else Jim Blake's been called, no one's yet tied 'fool' to his name. I tell you once more, we'll have her name by midnight at the very latest. Of course she doesn't know we're tracking her," he continued, chuckling as at his own shrewdness. "I've seen to it that she hasn't the slightest suspicion. And that makes our work all the easier. She doesn't know. And there's no one to warn her. It's a cinch!"

His voice trailed off into a self-satisfied laugh. Nor was the laugh wholly assumed. For he saw Standish's hands slowly clench again. And a few beads of sweat were beginning to show themselves upon the insurgent's forehead.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

THERE was a pause. Neither man seemed desirous to be first to return to the attack. The buzz of the city crept in from outside. The half-stifled rhythm of the dining-room orchestra reached them in snatches.

"H'lo!" droned Wanda Kelly at the switchboard. "Yes'm. It's seven twenty-four. Yes'm. No. That's right. Western Union time. Yes'm. It's too bad your watch has stopped. Yes. They do sometimes, I know. Especially if they don't get wound up. I'm sure you're welcome."

Standish got to his feet; slowly and more like a very old man than one in his prime. But he looked down with crass stolidity at his tormentor. And in his deep tones there was more of sorrow than of nervous dread.

"Mr. Blake," he said, "there's one point I can't

quite grasp. Even your admiration for my worthy qualities and your very kind desire to save me trouble, can not wholly explain your action in telling me. Why are you giving away your hand like this?"

Blake looked pained.

"Can't a man do a decent thing for once," he grumbled, "without having his motives picked apart?"

"I'm afraid not—in your case," answered Standish.

"All right," agreed Blake in no whit chagrined. "Let's look at it from a business standpoint, then. If you'll decide suddenly to let this Mullins bill pass, and if you'll support Mark Robertson for the speakership, everything will be perfectly smooth and harmonious. And we won't have to use these painful means—"

"Oh, I see. A bargain?"

"One that you won't lose by," said Blake. "A mighty good one, since it saves you your political skin, instead of forcing us to nail it to the barn."

"But," argued Standish, "what explanation could I give, for—"

"That's up to you. There are a dozen ways out. Get sick if you like. The country's fairly buzzing with doctors who'll be glad to give you a certificate for anything from gastralgia to housemaid's knee. That's what doctors are for. Lots of men have changed their views overnight. You can fix up a good slick water-proof excuse, easy enough."

Standish did not answer. Blake, feeling victory less near than he had hoped, put on the screws.

"Standish," said he, "I'd just naturally *hate* to use this story. But I'm afraid we've got to. It's eat or be eaten. And I always like to be on the chair side of the dinner. This disgrace will put you down and out forever, after all your cant about high morals, and the preachers holding you up as a holy example to the Y. M. C. A. boys, and all that. Oh, it'll be a sweet-scented situation for you, all right, all right!"

Despite his confidence Blake was vaguely worried. He knew men, as a pianist knows his keyboard. And now a subtle intuition, quite at variance with all his keen logic, warned him that Standish was not in the least frightened by the threat of po-

litical death. Knowing the insurgent's high ambitions as he did, Blake could not account for this absence of terror. So, feeling his way, he shifted to the other tack.

"The Woman, too," he added. "Think of her!"

He grinned under his sparse mustache. For again he saw Standish's hands clench. And he knew he had struck the one right note.

"Yes," went on Blake. "Think of the Woman! She's walking blindly, unsuspectingly, right straight into the trap we've set for her. It'll be hell for her. Pure, unadulterated, sky-blue *hell*. If she's got a husband or kids or parents it'll blacken the whole world for them all. Oh, *don't* make us do this thing, man! Think it over. Don't decide in a rush. Take your time. By eleven o'clock or so I'll have her name. Then it will be early enough for you to tell me your decision. You'll find me somewhere about the hotel, if I'm not over at the Capitol. Good-by."

"One moment!" protested Standish. "How do I know there's a chance of your finding the Woman you speak of? How do I know this boast that you're

on her trail is just a trick to make me think you know more than you do? I've nothing but your word for it. And—you'll pardon me, I'm sure—the collateral isn't quite good enough."

Blake smiled in apologetic patronage as might a master-magician who is asked by a bumpkin to explain his choicest conjuring feats.

"Well, now, old man," he answered, laughing amusedly, "you really don't expect me to give the whole snap away, do you? Not much. If you knew what our trap is you might spring it prematurely and give the poor mouse a chance to get away before she nibbled at our bait. No, no. I'll leave all that to your good sense. You know me. And if you don't think I can make good, of course that's your own affair. There's nothing in it for me, to come and warn you like this. I don't like to think what the boys would say if they knew I'd done it. They were all for leaving you in the dark. But I said: 'No, I'm no measly virgin, myself. It might have happened to almost any one. I'm going to give the boy his chance.' And I've done it. Take it or leave it. I'm too tender-hearted, anyway, to be a good

politician. But I always feel better for having done a kindness. Even to an enemy. By-by. I hope I haven't spoiled your appetite."

He strolled off toward the dining-room. As he passed Wanda he glanced covertly at her through his lowered lids. She was raptly absorbed in the novel she was reading. And her dainty lower jaw moved slowly up and down in a gum-chewing cadence that bespoke years of practise.

Standish watched Blake out of sight. His face, now that the mask was no longer needful, worked almost grotesquely. And his swarthy skin was a pallid yellow. He looked like a pugilist who tries dazedly to rise after a knock-out.

He was thinking rapidly; despite his daze. After a moment or two he crossed hastily to the telephone switchboard.

"Get me a New York wire, please," he said, looking nervously down the corridor, "as quickly as you can."

As he spoke he was running over the pages of one of the telephone books on the desk. Wanda drove a plug into the switchboard and droned;

"H'lo! Long distance? That you, Jessie? This is Wanda. Say, get me a New York wire—on the jump, please. Yes. Oh, have you? Good! Let the other party wait, and give it to *me,* won't you? Thanks. I've got one already," she added, glancing over her shoulder at Standish. "What number, please?"

"One thousand and one, Plaza," he answered, looking up from the directory.

"Plaza one—o—o—one!" she droned into the transmitter. "Any name, Mr. Standish?"

"No," he answered huskily. "Just the number."

"A'ri! Here you are—number one booth, please. H'lo New York!" she continued into the transmitter, shoving a plug in and out of the switchboard three or four times, *"Plaza one—o—o—one.* Yes, *Plaza one—o—o—ONE!"*

Standish had gone to the first of the numbered booths. At its door he paused.

"Miss Kelly," said he, "would you mind taking that receiver off your head while I'm telephoning?"

"Certainly," she answered in evident ill-temper at the slur implied by the request.

She carefully removed and hung up the metal crescent that held the receiver to her left ear. Then she raised both hands to make certain the removal had not mussed her hair. Standish had closed the booth door and, from the corner of her eye, Wanda could see him through the glass pane, speaking into the transmitter. But she had barely noted the first movement of his lips when Blake and Mark Robertson appeared from the dining-room. She turned her attention to them.

Blake glanced unobtrusively toward the row of telephone booths and his half-shut eyes lighted ever so little as he made out Standish's figure behind the glass. But he made no other sign that he noted the successful springing of the trap he had so painstakingly set. In fact, he was talking interestedly to Robertson on indifferent topics.

"Tom tells me," Wanda heard him say, "that Grace is coming down."

"Yes," answered Robertson, his face brightening at mention of his wife's name, "either to-night or to-morrow morning. And that reminds me: I meant to call her up and ask which. I want to meet

her at the station. Miss Kelly," he went on, "can you get me a New York wire?"

"Yes, sir," said Wanda; "but it'll take a few minutes to get the connection."

"All right," replied Robertson, as she busied herself amid the labyrinth of switchboard plugs, "I'll wait here for it. I—"

He stopped as Standish came out of the booth and laid down a bill for Wanda to change. Robertson, the happy light of anticipation dying out of his face at sight of his foe, turned his back ostentatiously upon him. Nor did he speak again till Standish had gone away. Then he looked around, to find his father-in-law in eager conversation with the telephone operator.

"Well," Blake was saying. "Could you hear anything?"

"No," answered Wanda, still deeply offended at Standish's request. "Not a word. He made me hang up the receiver."

"Huh!" grunted Blake. "He's got more sense than I thought. But the number? You got the number, of course. Didn't you?"

"Oh, yes," she returned, "I got the number, all right."

Blake unceremoniously reached over the rail and picked up the pad on which a list of numbers was jotted down.

"Is that the one?" he asked, pointing to the last number inscribed there.

"Oh, no," said Wanda, recovering her pad and laying it back in its place on the desk, with a little slam to emphasize Blake's rudeness in taking it away. "That isn't the one. I'm leaving the line blank, so I can fill in the number later. It's too valuable to put on paper—just yet."

"You're a born diplomat," he approved, a trifle grudgingly. "Well, what *was* the number?"

"Just a minute," she interrupted. "Wasn't there a question of—of—?"

"Of a thousand dollars for you. Yes, there was. That goes."

"Does it?" she queried sweetly. "Not with *me*, it doesn't."

"Look here, young woman!" snarled Blake, his habitual calm giving place to a sort of vulpine sav-

agery. "Don't you try to hold *me* up! If you do you'll find you've got a wildcat by the tail."

"Dear me!" she cried in pretty terror. "Well, I'll —I'll have to think it over. Here's your New York wire, Governor Robertson," she called to Mark. "What was the number you wanted, please?"

Robertson came across to the rail.

"Get Mrs. Robertson—my wife—on the phone," said he. "If she's not in, get one of the servants. I—"

"You didn't tell me the number," she reminded him.

"Oh," he laughed. "Careless of me! I forgot I wasn't talking to my secretary. He generally calls up my New York home for me. The number is 'Plaza one—double o—one'."

There was an imperceptible pause. A momentary contraction of Wanda's throat. Then, in her everlasting professional monotone she droned into the receiver:

"H'lo! New York? *Plaza one—o—o—one!*"

CHAPTER IX

A LION IN A RABBIT TRAP

MARK hurried into the nearest telephone booth. Wanda stared after him, in scared fascination. Her face had turned oddly white.

"One—o—o—one," she repeated to herself, dazedly, as she mechanically jotted down the number on her pad.

"Now then!" Jim Blake was demanding at her elbow, "you and I will settle this thing, my girl. I want that number!"

"The one Governor Robertson just called up?" she faltered, unconsciously sparring for time in which to readjust the dizzy whirl of her ideas around the one central theme that had leaped into her mind.

"No. The number Standish called up. The number of the Woman whose name I'm after!" snarled Blake. "What is it? Out with it, girl!"

"Oh," laughed Wanda, nearer to hysterics than ever before in her life, "I—I couldn't give away a number, Mr. Blake. It's against the rules, you know. I was only joking about the money, and—"

"Joking!" mocked Blake. "Well, you'll find it's the painfulest, costliest joke you ever played, my young friend! If it's a joke, then the joke will be on *you.*"

"But—" she pleaded.

"You've got a bit of knowledge that we need—and need damned bad. A bit of knowledge we've got to have—and *mean* to have. Understand that? And what we've got to get, we *get.* Now, is it fight or not? Will you take the money I've offered you or will you run your silly young head into the hottest bunch of trouble a girl ever met with? Which'll it be? Speak out!"

"I—I don't know. It'll disgrace the Woman, won't it, if I tell?"

"It'll smash *you* if you don't! What is it to you if she's disgraced or not?"

"That's so," purred Wanda, suddenly recovering her shattered nerves. "What is it to me—or to you—if she's destroyed, so long as the machine wins?

And it'd be perfectly terrible if the machine shouldn't win. Now wouldn't it?"

"It'll be terrible for any one who tries to block it," retorted Blake, grim and wrathful.

"Well," sighed Wanda distractedly, "I'll just have to think it over very carefully. Of course, I like you, Mr. Blake. I've always admired you a lot. You've got such a lovely personality and—"

"Drop that!" he roared.

"And," pursued Wanda, "I've always admired the machine a lot, too. It does things in such a businesslike way. But—but, of course, I couldn't really take money from you. If I tell that number it'll just be because I want you to win. That's all. Just because I want to see you win."

"That's better!" grunted Blake, his face clearing. "You won't be sorry."

"You bet I won't!" she retorted, and her young voice was as keen as a knife blade, and as hard. "I won't be one bit sorry. And my conscience will be clear. It'll be a load off my shoulders. But," she ended, falling back on indecision, "I—I must think it over a while."

"A while?" echoed Blake. "There's no time to lose. You understand the situation. I've made it all clear to you. If I don't get that Woman's name before the Mullins bill comes up for a vote it will be of no use to me. And we'll lose. I must know the name to-night. I—"

"I'll make up my mind to-night," answered Wanda cryptically; and she returned to her novel.

Blake glared at her in angry doubt. Before he could speak again, Robertson came out of the booth.

"I must be off," said Mark. "My butler says Grace took the train that's due to reach Washington at eight this evening. I've no time to waste if I'm to be at the station when it comes in."

He hurried off. After a second glance toward the utterly oblivious Wanda, Blake followed him from the corridor. Wanda did not look up. Her eyes were still bent eagerly on her book. But the type was a twisting blur to her senses. To herself she was murmuring disjointedly:

"His own daughter—Mark Robertson's wife—Tom's sister—! And Jim Blake moving heaven and earth and a quarter-section of hell, too, to get her

name for a campaign scandal. If I give it to him, I guess a big part of father's debt to the machine will be paid off. If—"

"Hello!" called Tom, crossing the corridor from the dining-room. "What are you reading? By the way you stare at that book it must have all the best sellers looking like the Congressional Record. What's it about?"

She raised a blank drawn face to him.

"About?" she repeated absently. "Oh, it's—it's about a man who set a trap for a rabbit—and caught a lion in it."

CHAPTER X

THE GENTLE ART OF FILIBUSTERING

THE house of representatives sat at ten that night. The reporters' gallery, up behind the speaker's chair, was jammed. In the visitors' gallery, across the way, a close-packed eager throng peered down into the political amphitheater below.

For, as every newspaper had heralded, this was to be a night of battle. And the eagles of the press, together with the vultures of the sensation-loving outer world, had flocked to the slaughter.

Yet to an unlearned observer, the spectacle would not have been inspiring. Here, in brief, is the scene such an outsider would have witnessed and the impressions he would have drawn therefrom had a wiser man been at his side to whisper an occasional needful explanation:

A great desk-filled room, wherein lounged a crowd of men ranging in years from youth to gnarled age. A sprinkling of the delegates were in

evening dress, having come from dinners or other functions. More were in frock suits. But the majority were in street attire. This latter form of costume varied from the artist-tailor's product on some urban representative to the very palpable "This-Nobby-Style-$14.50" garb of the backwoods delegate.

A few men were poring over the sheafs of printed bills at their desks. Many were gathered in knots of three or four, talking earnestly. Others sprawled back in their chairs palpably bored. One or two would have had trouble in convincing any jury as to their complete sobriety. A hum of talk neither profound nor elevating rose to the galleries.

Then a few moments after the stroke of ten, the speaker appeared from his office and mounted to his desk. Neligan and one or two others who had accompanied him into the room, slouched to their seats. The speaker smote the desk with his hard-worked gavel and announced, nasally:

"The house will be in order!"

There was a leisurely breaking up of groups and a straying back to desks.

"The clerk will call the roll of the house!" continued the speaker.

The clerk therewith proceeded to rattle off, at a great rate, the roll of the members. Frequently a member—and always, in the case of a first-year man—responded to his name. But many paid no heed whatever to the call.

"The fun is going to begin in a minute," said an old Washingtonian in the gallery to a rural guest whose ignorance of matters parliamentary was profound. "Here's the idea: that Mullins bill I told you about, is due to come to a vote to-night. Standish and his insurgents are strong enough to defeat it now. And the machine men know it. That's why they're going to try to put off the vote, every way they can. Filibustering, you know. There are lots of ways. And you're likely to hear all of them. The speaker is in with the machine and he'll recognize any one who rises to stave off the vote. They may drag it on all night, with his help. The clerk over there is a machine man, too. He'll do his share. Wait and see how."

The clerk had finished buzzing his version of the

members' names and habitats. Scarcely had he done so when Neligan was on his feet, "caught the speaker's eye," was duly "recognized", and forthwith begged to call the chair's attention to the fact that there was not a quorum present.

"But the place is nearly full!" whispered the old Washingtonian's guest.

"The filibustering is on," answered his mentor. "There are enough members here. Any one can see that. But a good many didn't bother to answer the roll. Most of those were machine men, of course. Listen!"

There was a crash of bells throughout the anterooms and halls. A count had been made of the roll. And now swift and loud summonses were flashed into committee rooms. Pages rushed through corridors, lounging-rooms and restaurant, squalling: "Call of the house! Roll-call! Roll-call! Call of the house!"

From everywhere members poured into the room. Some were yawning, some were wiping their mouths, some finishing a heated dispute. They drifted to their seats. Another calling of the roll—

much more slowly this time—and a prompt answer from every one.

But the attention of the ignorant one wandered. A nudge from his Washington host brought it back again, as the speaker announced a little later:

"The house will proceed to the consideration of the bill of the house of representatives, number 99,999,945."

"That's the Mullins bill," the Washingtonian informed his guest.

"The bill," continued the speaker, "is before the house for the third reading."

A half score men were on their feet, as he ceased. But, foremost in the throng was Matthew Standish. He had left his seat and had strode into the semicircular space in front of the speaker's desk. The speaker was forced to recognize him and did so, a trifle grudgingly, it appeared to the ignorant one.

Standish moved, in curt formal phrase, that the bill be read "by title"; in order to save the house the fatigue of listening to a thirty-minute perusal of it by the clerk.

"The gentleman from New Jersey," said the

speaker, "moves that the bill be read by title. Are there any objections?"

There were objections. There were, in fact, so many and such vociferous objections that for a space the United States House of Representatives might have been supposed to be practising for the Roman mob scene in *Julius Cæsar*. The machine men were fairly howling objections. To gather from the objectors' manner it was apparent none of them had so much as heard of the Mullins bill; and, as defenders and wise builders of the nation's laws, they evidently had no intention of committing themselves to a vote on a bill of whose contents they were so starkly ignorant.

"As a matter of fact," the Washingtonian was explaining to the ignorant one, "every man of 'em has read and reread that bill fifty times and heard it discussed and pulled to pieces and tacked together again. They could repeat it by heart. And, even if they couldn't, there's a complete printed copy of it on each man's desk."

As the tumultuous demand for enlightenment died down, the speaker instructed the clerk to read the

bill. The clerk obeyed, reading slowly and with a beautiful precision. But no one gave his reading the heed that its excellence merited. No sooner had he begun a perusal of the bill's first clause, than men began to leave the room.

A number of the departing members were the men who had yelled the loudest and most insistently that the bill be read. Out they strolled. And presently, through the doorways of the adjacent lounging-rooms, wreaths of tobacco smoke floated in.

The speaker himself left his place, beckoned to several adherents and vanished with them into his office. Among the members who were left in the room, some read letters, some scribbled notes or memoranda and some talked together in tones that were not over-low.

"Delays the vote by half an hour," interpreted the Washingtonian as the ignorant one looked on in horror at such seeming boorishness on the part of his country's representatives.

At length the dreary task of reading was accomplished. And the members returned to their places.

The next outburst came from the insurgents who

broke into a vociferous shout of "Question! Question!"

"That means," whispered the Washingtonian, "they want to bring the bill to a vote right away."

The speaker, after a gavel solo on his desk, harkened to the cry and announced that the bill would forthwith be brought to a vote. Instantly Tim Neligan was on his feet. And with equal promptness the speaker recognized him.

"I move the house now adjourn!" said Neligan.

"A motion to adjourn," translated the Washingtonian, "is always in order and never debatable. One of the best of all filibustering tactics."

But the ignorant one did not hear him. At once, on Neligan's words had followed an uproar that drowned all lesser sounds. The insurgents were voicing their protest against the motion. And some of them, perhaps not trusting to the power of their lungs, eked out the racket by beating their fists thunderously upon their desks. The babel was punctuated by weary and perfunctory raps of the speaker's gavel and by his totally unemotional calls for order.

In the midst of the turmoil the motion to adjourn was seconded.

. . . "Moved and seconded," the ignorant one heard disjointedly, ". . . in favor . . . aye."

A bellow of "ayes" shook the room, each machine man trying to swell the volume of assent into the semblance of a larger number of voices.

At the call for negative opinion, a mighty and indignant "No!" showed even to the ignorant one the disposition of the house and the strength of the insurgents. Nor could the speaker himself ignore the superiority of numbers.

"The 'noes' seem to have it," he ventured as if still in doubt.

He got no further. All previous vocal and desk-banging efforts had been as nothing by comparison to the tempest of indignant protest that now rose from the machine members at hearing such an opinion from the chair.

When the gavel and exhaustion had combined to calm the first storm of noise, Standish (who, with a dozen or more excited gesticulating men, was in

the open space in front of the desks) caught the speaker's eye, and requested a "rising vote".

The "ayes" were accordingly bidden to rise. And while the clerks did the actual counting of the standing machine men, the speaker pointed the leveled handle of his gavel at one man after another as though making a personal tally of the score.

The same proceedings followed when the "noes" —a palpably larger number—arose.

"On the motion to adjourn," declared the speaker, when the count was complete, "one hundred and twenty-one in favor. Two hundred and thirty-eight oppose. The 'noes' have it."

Neligan was on his feet, clamoring for recognition. He received it with the customary promptitude, and demanded a "vote by tellers". The house laughed its appreciation.

"That means," construed the Washingtonian, "that the chair will appoint one teller from each faction and that the ayes and noes will have to file, one crowd after the other, like a bread line, between the tellers. As they pass by, the tellers will bring down their hands between every two men and count them

off. And the machine crowd won't move any too fast, either; as you'll see."

"But what's the use of it all?" demanded the ignorant one. "It sounds idiotic to me."

"It's already put off the vote by a full hour," said the Washingtonian. "And the machine's got other tactics just as good. Long-winded speeches, for instance. And, remember, a motion to adjourn is always in order. It can be made a dozen times in a day, if the speaker will stand for it. And he will, to-night. Then the same old proceedings have to be gone over with each time. Good fun, isn't it?"

"Yes," muttered the ignorant one, "about as sprightly sport for onlookers as reading a page of the city directory. What's up now?"

The tedious "vote by tellers" was at last over. And the result, as every one had foreseen, tallied precisely with that of the former count. Whereat, another of Blake's mouthpieces demanded a "call of the house on the motion to adjourn." There was another rattling of desks accompanied by howls.

The speaker intoned his useless command for order and thumped rhythmically with his gavel.

When quiet again settled down, the clerk obediently reread the long roll-call. He read it with irritating slowness; then read the names of the absentees. After which the speaker formally declared that the motion to adjourn was lost.

The ignorant one, battling with sleepiness, heard him ask:

"What . . . pleasure of . . . house?"

Standish took the floor and offered a motion that debate on the bill be limited to one hour. More uproar, opposition, and interminable delay in ascertaining the "pleasure of the house".

But before the debate could be instituted, another machine man voiced the alluringly original motion to adjourn. And once more the previous dreary performance, sanctioned by parliamentary law, was enacted.

Standish, by infinite patience, at last brought the house back to the verge of debate when a large and preternaturally solemn wheel-horse of the machine lifted himself to his feet. Far back in the crowd as he was, he had the miraculous good fortune to catch the speaker's eye before he was half out of his chair.

The honorable member rose—so the honorable member announced—to a question of personal privilege.

"I was waiting for something like that," grinned the Washingtonian. "A man must always be allowed to speak on a question of personal privilege. And that old guy will talk half the night."

The privilege-seeker begged to call the house's attention to the lamentable fact that an alleged statement of his had been misconstrued by one of the newspapers into an expression of personal opinion of the bill now under discussion.

"He'll talk until his tongue is paralyzed," said the Washingtonian, "and then some one will move to adjourn. And after that, some other machine orator will find a parliamentary excuse to talk for two hours more."

But the ignorant one did not hear the dire forecast. He was sleeping sweetly. And in the golden stretches of dreamland his mind forgot that his tired body was still in the sacred halls to whose august brotherhood's membership every worthy young man is urged to aspire.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE DAY OF BATTLE

RALPH VAN DYKE, corporation lawyer, and the railroads' mouthpiece in Washington, sat by the desk lamp in the library of Mark Robertson's Hotel Keswick suite, reading—and here and there altering—several typewritten sheets. Across the desk from him sat Jim Blake, cigar in one hand, a telephone receiver held to his ear.

The master of the machine was not leading his forces in person to-night. He seldom did so. The commanding general's place is on a convenient hilltop; not in the vulgar thick of the fray. And, for divers reasons, Blake had chosen his son-in-law's apartment, on this night, as his hilltop. The telephone admirably filled for him the dual rôles of spy-glass and courier. Just now, he was listening intently to a report from Tim Neligan at the Capitol.

"Good old Tim!" he broke out after a moment's

close attention to the receiver. "What d'ye think of that, Van Dyke? We get the roll-call."

"Good!" pronounced Van Dyke, glancing up from his reading.

"Standish still in his seat?" queried Blake into the transmitter. "Yes? All right. Keep right on with the program I gave you. No need to change it unless something unexpected cuts loose. And it won't. What? No. Not yet. Can't get a word out of her. But we will. Don't you worry. So long."

"Well," he added to Van Dyke, as he hung up the receiver and pushed the telephone back on the table-desk's flat surface. "This roll-call gives us another hour to breathe in."

"We'll need it. And more," said Van Dyke, returning to his reading.

Blake rose, stretched himself, and strolled across to the window. Drawing aside the curtains he looked out. Washington lay cold and beautiful under the winter starlight. From the great bulk of the Capitol blazed lines of white lights.

"H'm!" muttered Blake, glancing back at the desk

clock and then out again toward the spot where his forces were battling. "I haven't seen those lights burning so late since the night we lost Uncle Joe."

The lawyer did not answer. He was correcting a sentence in the manuscript he held. Blake moved across to him and glanced over his shoulder.

"Sure you're making that strong enough, Van Dyke?" he asked. "Don't use the word 'utensil' when 'spade' will do just as well. Cut out any flowery stuff and bang away at the point."

"I have," replied Van Dyke, handing Blake the edited pages. "Look it over and see how it strikes you."

Blake took the manuscript and scanned its contents from beneath his drooped lids. As he read, a look of unqualified approval replaced the doubt on his face. He nodded emphatically, once or twice. In his interest he unconsciously muttered, half aloud, certain disjointed phrases of what he was reading.

" 'Standish, the arch reformer,' " he murmured. " 'A moralist dethroned—scandalous past of a house leader brought to light—disciple of purity in politics

"Standish still in his seat?" queried Blake into the transmitter.

convicted of dissolute private life'—H'm! That's the stuff. It'll make 'em sit up, I guess."

"If we can use it," corrected Van Dyke. "As it stands, it represents nothing but three spoiled sheets of white paper."

"It'll represent one perfectly good insurgent chief split up the back, before another hour's past," retorted Blake. "I'll have the Woman's name by that time."

"What is that stubborn little telephone girl holding out for, I wonder?"

"It's past me!" growled Blake. "If it was a man I could size up the game at a glance and I'd know just what move to make. Every man has always had his price. Except One. And we crucified Him. But with women it's different. You can't tell what a woman's going to do. For the mighty good reason that she doesn't know, herself. This Kelly girl's got me guessing. She let me think I could buy her dead easy. Then she played for time. And now she's thrown us down altogether and won't say a word."

"You've sent over to central for that duplicate list of all the numbers that were called up from the Keswick to-day? Let me look at them."

"They aren't here yet," replied Blake. "I only sent for them a few minutes ago. You see, I thought I could save a lot of time by getting the information, direct, from the girl herself."

"The girl!" echoed Van Dyke disgustedly. "We've already wasted too much time on her. Can't we get hold of Standish?"

"He'll be along pretty soon."

"You've sent for him? You're sure he'll come for your sending?"

"No," drawled Blake, "I didn't. And he wouldn't. But Gregg started a whisper in the house that a scandal will break before morning. And he threw a hint of the same sort to the newspaper boys. Neligan tells me you couldn't get another reporter into the press gallery now with a shoe-horn. All that will bring Standish here. To give him an excuse—if he wants one, and I don't think he will—I'm sending him a note—"

"Oh, if we can publish this as it's written here,"

broke in Van Dyke, "we've got him! This story makes him out the lowest blackguard unhung."

"And," amended Blake with ingenuous self-congratulation, "there isn't a word in it that hasn't got some sort of foundation on fact. That's saying a whole lot for a campaign scandal. We've got facts —real *facts*. Maybe some of 'em are twisted around so that you'd have to look at 'em twice before recognizing their dear familiar faces. But they're facts, just the same."

"And they're useless," grumbled Van Dyke, "just because the one fact we need we haven't got."

"You mean the Woman?"

"The Woman's *name*. We can't get any one to believe a word of the story without that. What time is it? Oh, I didn't notice the clock. The time's getting short—dangerously short. If we want to get this story in any of to-morrow's papers we must have her name mighty quick. As it is, I'm afraid it'll be too late for anything but the last editions of the morning papers. What did the Associated Press people say, when you—?"

"Jennings promised to hold a wire till the last

minute. Better take the story around to him and tell him to have it ready. He understands. But be sure to tell him not to let it go till I give the word. A false move just now would be a boomerang that we couldn't stand. Come back as soon as you can. We may need you."

Van Dyke, pocketing the typewritten sheets, departed on his mission; almost colliding at the door with Tom Blake, who was coming in.

"Hello, dad!" hailed Tom. "I just dropped in on the way to the club to say 'howdy' to Grace. Where is she? Turned in?"

"No. Hasn't even got in. The train's hours late. Washout on the road somewhere. Mark telephoned up from the station. He's gone back there. They ought to be here any time now. Want to wait?"

"Poor old Mark! It's he who's doing the waiting. He hates waiting for anything. I don't believe he'd wait at a station half an hour for the czar of Russia. But he'd wait there all night for the chance of seeing Grace for half a minute. And he wouldn't be cranky

about it, either. It's funny what love will do for a man. Why—"

The jangling of the telephone interrupted him. Blake picked up the instrument.

"Hello, Henderson," he said, in response to a greeting from the other end of the wire. "Yes—yes—All right. Say, did you get that information I told you to? Good! No, no! Don't tell me anything over the phone. Send word by Neligan when he comes. By the way, just keep your eye on Standish, will you? And let me know the minute he leaves the Capitol. Good-by."

"Aren't you taking chances in being away from the Capitol to-night, dad? Or can you handle the fight just as well from here as from—"

"I don't take chances, son. Sometimes they take *me* and then I have to outwit them. If I could be of any use at the Capitol, why I'd be as much a fixture there, to-night, as the chamber of horrors—the state statues, I mean. But Winthrop will get the floor after this roll-call. And he's got orders to talk—talk—talk and then talk some more, and, after

that, to keep on talking—until I send him word to give his mouth a holiday. We're safe for a good two hours."

"I'm sleepy!" yawned Tom. "Gee, but I wish Grace would show up!"

"So does Mark," answered Blake. Then, after a moment, a chuckle of genuine amusement startled his son.

"What's the joke?" asked Tom. "Did I miss it?"

"Yes, you missed it, all right. Both you and Grace always miss it. But *I* never do. I was just thinking—my little Grace—my kid—keeping the former governor of New York cooling his heels in a drafty railroad station. And, forty years ago, her father was a barefoot kid with one suspender, panhandling kind-hearted old folks in the street with dying-mother stories and getting nickels from 'em. And even as lately as twenty-two years ago, what was I but a Chicago city clerk making an honest living by keeping my eyes shut and my palm open?"

"Dad," complained Tom, "I can't make you out! You always seem to take a savage delight in rubbing

in the fact that everything we've got we owe to graft."

"Well," asked Blake, puzzled, "don't we? If we don't owe it to graft, what *do* we owe it to, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, we do, all right," muttered Tom. "But what's the use of admitting it?"

"Why should I admit it? Because I'm not ashamed of being a grafter. But I'd be ashamed to look at myself in the glass, when I brush the hair I haven't got any more, if I was a hypocrite. Lord, but I do hate a hypocrite! And if you've got any of the old man's blood in you, you do, too."

"Of course—yes—but—"

"Listen here, son: I'm going to waste four minutes' time in telling you just what a grafter is. Don't go saying you know what it is. You don't. Not one man in fifty does."

CHAPTER XII

THE GOSPEL OF GRAFT

TOM settled back in his chair—half resignedly, half expectant. It was not often that Jim Blake volunteered to waste four entire minutes in explaining anything to anybody. And the novelty of the project aroused in his impatient son a faint curiosity.

"Fire away!" said Tom. "The theme of the sermon, I understand, is Graft, as set forth by its arch exponent."

"If you like," vouchsafed Blake. "You can't make me sore by calling *me* a grafter. Because I belong to the right kind. You see, son, there's two sorts of grafters. One sort thinks he is committing a crime. Consequently, he's a criminal. The other —*my* sort, if you like—knows that graft is a national institution in America. He knows that the grafter's is a necessary public position and that it ought to be filled by an honest man. So he takes

what the public kindly provides and proceeds to get rich."

"There's one thing," corrected Tom, "that the public doesn't provide him with. And that's its respect."

"Its respect? Son, the public gives him that, even before he's got half its cash."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, you're a kid! Your silly head's stuffed with a lot of fool notions that you've dug out of measly books and pamphlets. If the folks who wrote that stuff had the right dope, d'you suppose they'd be wasting time and staying poor, by writing? Not they! They'd be living up to their own maxims and coining incomes that would make John D. Rockefeller look like a poor relation. You've read their books but you've never learned to read *men*. And, till they teach that in the schools, the public is liable to keep right on forgetting to sew up the hole in its cash-pocket. Who is it that makes graft possible?"

"Who?" echoed Tom. "The machine, of course. And the political ring in every country and city."

"You sound like a dinner-bell that doesn't tinkle till dinner's over. There's only one crowd that lets grafting keep on. And that crowd is made up of the missing links between the sheep and the donkey —which same missing links we call, for lack of a better name, the public."

"Surely—"

"Yes, the public. Graft couldn't last as long as a tallow dog chasing an asbestos cat through hell, if the public didn't permit it. Gee! If I wasn't so used to the idea I'd laugh myself sick over it. Here's the American public—with more money and more brains than every other nation on earth put together! And they're peaceably allowing themselves to be fleeced year after year."

"Not 'peaceably'. Often they protest and—"

"Oh, yes. They howl bloody murder, and yell: 'Thieves! Help, I'm being robbed!' And at the same time they sweep the sidewalk with their hats every time one of the robbers passes them in the street. Other nations have kings and nobility to kotow to. We haven't. So we gratify our normal

craving for groveling by making idols of our biggest grafters."

"No!"

"Yes. Not the pikers. Not the grocer who charges creamery prices for the wooden box the butter is weighed in. Not the butcher who weighs his hand with the cold storage steak. But the really *big* grafter. The man who plays for millions of dollars at every throw. The public adores him. Back comes Dick Croker from Ireland. The intelligent New York people yell themselves hoarse, shouting: 'Welcome back to what you've left of our city!' The big Wall Street grafters go to Europe, and emperors pin fancy medals on 'em. The public starts investigations about bad beef and the high cost of living. That sort of thing costs the grafters a bit of money. But they don't care. The minute the squeal dies down they get all the cash back again by putting up prices one notch higher. The public screams—and pays."

"But the people—"

"The people elect a president to fight the grafters.

And the minute he gets busy at it he damn near loses his job. Yes, sir, it's the people who want graft and support it. If they didn't want it—if they'd get together and vote it down—it wouldn't last a minute. Could I or any other man go to a fellow's house and pinch his watch and ring? Not on your life! Why not? Because he doesn't want us to. He'd shoot us or jail us. Can I get that same man's bank roll by grafting? I sure can. And I do. Why? Because he wants me to. If he didn't I couldn't get within a mile of it."

"But—"

"They all want some crumbs of the cake, themselves. They hope, by petty grafting, to grow into big grafters. In the meantime they look on the big grafter as a demigod. Graft! Why it's the mainstay of the day's news. It's the one item everybody's crazy to read. It's the bulwark of the magazines. Why, look here," he went on, picking up at random one of several magazines scattered on the table, and running over its pages. "Look here! *The Shame of the Cities—Where Did You Get it, Gentlemen?* And a lot more. There's no country on earth where

graft flourishes as it flourishes here. And it's because the public doesn't think a man's worth a hoot in Hades unless he can sell 'em a gold brick. Bah! Don't talk to me about the public! They've made me rich. But they sure give me a pain."

"Dad," observed Tom as Blake paused for breath, "I owe you an apology. I thought grafting was only a failing with you. But I see it's a religion."

"It is," cheerfully assented Blake. "I'm a Utilitarian. And the public is responsible for my conversion to that same cozy creed. And the public is responsible for—"

"Yes. The public is responsible. Just as they're responsible for the car of Juggernaut. Juggernaut! That's what a friend of mine called it to-day."

"Did, hey? Well, he wasn't so far wrong. If I remember rightly, from the dreary Y. M. C. A. stereopticon lecture on India that some of my constituents coaxed me into frequenting last time I was back home, the car of Juggernaut used to be dragged along by the people themselves. And it's the same in America. Only, here, the car's ropes are votes. Every now and then, some poor devil of a fanatic,

looking for the road to Heaven, makes a noise like a reformer and hurls himself in front of the car. He gets crushed. But poor old Juggernaut can't help it. *He* isn't pushing the car. He's only riding in it. And no two or three men could budge it. Nothing short of a noble army of voters could get it into motion. So when I see the whole long-eared population tugging at the ropes, I'd rather climb into the car and get a free ride than to make my mark in the world—face down—under the wheels."

"Don't deceive yourself into the idea that the public won't wake up. The—"

"Wake up? Of course the public will wake up. It's liable to wake up any minute. And that's why I want to get mine, first. Like my good 'hoot mon' friend, Andy, once I've got enough for myself I'm quite willing to 'take the duty off steel'."

"And turn reformer and philanthropist?" sneered Tom.

"There you go!" retorted Blake. "There you go, using a big mouthful of words, without having the faintest idea of what they mean. When you get to theorizing, son, you always remind me of a gull

swimming on the Atlantic Ocean—drawing four inches of water and without the remotest notion of the infinite depths beneath him. Reform—and philanthropy! A reformer is a grafter out of a job. And philanthropy is the bandage clapped over the eyes of justice. Take your friend, Standish, for instance. If he gets into power will he be a bit better than we are?"

"Frankly," answered Tom, "I think he will."

"Why? Tell me that? Why do you think he will?"

"Because," said Tom reluctantly, "he is honest."

"Oh, lord!" groaned Blake. "You're hopeless! You're a big disappointment to me, Tom. I've got plans for you. Wonderful plans. And sometimes I'm afraid you won't make good. Why can't you be more like Mark? Look what he's done for himself and the party in the past few years."

"Why shouldn't he? He's got you and the organization behind him. And scruples don't bother him. He's got a machine instead of a heart. The only human thing about him is his adoration for Grace."

"Yes, he worships her, all right. But he doesn't

let it interfere with his political plans. Now, in *your* case—"

"I don't want to disappoint you, dad," interrupted Tom. "But before you go any further in your arrangements for me, it's only fair to tell you I've been making a few plans of my own."

"Have, hey?" queried Blake as though listening to the prattle of a somewhat backward child of six. "Such as what, for instance?"

"Well," answered Tom, trying not to show his irritation at Blake's tone. "I—the fact is—I want to get married."

"The blazes you do! Is that a boast or a confession?"

"I don't quite understand you," said Tom stiffly.

"I mean," began his father, "I mean—oh, never mind all that. Who's the girl?"

"Before I tell you," evaded Tom, "I'd like to get your views on the proposition in general."

"In general?" repeated Blake. "Son, marriage is never a proposition in general! Because every woman is an exception that proves no rule. You can't classify 'em any more than you can classify

a nest of hornets that you happen to step into. Hell's full of women. So's Heaven, I guess. But neither class got to either place by following any 'proposition in general'. Tell me," he demanded, his philosophical mood changing in a flash to one of almost savage intentness, "is this girl the sort who can help you in getting where I want to put you?"

"How can I tell? You've never told me just where you intended to put me."

"Then I'll tell you now. There's no real need in your sailing any farther under sealed orders. I've made you a pretty fair lawyer. You'll have one more term as assistant district attorney. Then one as district attorney. Then as attorney-general. After that a term or two in the cabinet—just to get the run of things—"

"There's only one thing left," said Tom, almost in awe, as his father hesitated.

"Yes?" replied Blake grimly. "Well, maybe that won't be left when we get through. Now you can see why the girl must be of good family and have social position and breeding and all that kind of thing. Those are the things *I'm* shy on. And my

children must make it up for me. I've got Grace started—she's been governor—and— Why, look at the style she lives in! And I can remember when you and she slept in a trundle-bed in a tumble-down Chicago tenement. Now that I've got Grace started it is *your* turn. This girl you want to marry—can she help you? Can you take her with you—right up to the White House?"

"I don't know," returned Tom. "You see, I've never thought of her as a political asset. I want her for a sweetheart—not for a show-window. And happiness means a good deal more to me than position. I've already told her so. I—"

"Told her so? Then—then, you've asked her to marry you?"

"Yes."

"And, of course, when she looked me up in Bradstreet and—"

"She's refused me—so far."

"Well!" grinned Blake, vastly relieved. "That's far enough, I guess. Don't go overplaying your luck."

"I'm going to stick at it till I win out!" declared Tom. "And I'm—"

"No, no! Don't do a crazy thing like that, son," pleaded Blake. "Take your medicine like a man. Don't keep on pestering the poor girl. By the way, you haven't told me who she is."

"She's—" faltered Tom; then, taking the plunge, he blurted out: "she's Miss Kelly."

"Kelly?" repeated Blake, mystified.

"Yes. Wanda Kelly, the phone operator downstairs."

"What?" exploded Blake.

Then he collapsed in the nearest chair and stared in blank helplessness at his son.

"Well," demanded Tom, instantly on the defensive.

"It's—it's a bum joke," growled Blake. "Maybe it'd go better with the banjo. Stop guying me, boy, and tell me who the girl really is."

"I told you," repeated Tom. "She is Wanda Kelly."

There was a dead pause. Blake at last broke it.

"There's about forty-five million women in the United States," he muttered dazedly, "and out of that whole lot, you had to go and—and fall in love with—"

"That's right," laughed Tom. "It certainly looks that way."

"Then," stormed Blake, "go take another look."

"What's your objection?" bristled Tom. "You don't even know her, yet."

"I don't, hey?" retorted Blake.

Then, checking the impulse to tell his son the story of his verbal tilt with Wanda, he added:

"Maybe I don't. But I know her kind. She's after a rich man's son. She's an easy-mark hunter. And she's found one all right, all right."

"That's absurd. You don't know—"

"Absurd or not," snapped Blake, "it's got to stop short! I'm not going to let you throw yourself away on a girl like that. You shan't ruin your life's happiness—"

"Oh," cut in Tom, with angry sarcasm. "It's my happiness you're thinking of, is it?"

"Yes, it is!" cried Blake. "And I'll secure your happiness if I have to—"

"You're bound you'll 'have peace, if you have to lick every galoot in the valley to get it'," quoted Tom.

But his father did not heed.

"Yes!" shouted Blake. "And if it comes to a show-down, I'll withdraw my support from you. And then what can you do? Hey? Answer me that. Here I've given you the softest snap there is —a big salary for loafing around an office a few hours a week. How much could you make by your own law practise if once I take my hand from under you? You haven't got an earning ability of a thousand dollars a year. And you know it. Suppose I try that; and see if she's so blooming anxious, then, to marry you."

"I understand," said Tom bitterly. "You're so keen on my being happy that you'll wreck my happiness to make me so. But you're wrong. I didn't ask your consent. I just told you what my plans are. That's all."

"It's enough, I guess."

"Look here, dad. You spoke just now of coming to a show-down. Also you claim I'm no good without your backing. If I can't make a living on my own hook, it's high time for me to begin to learn how. If all the education and money and training

you've spent on me have fitted me for nothing except to be a political catspaw for you, it's time I started along a fresh line. If a man, nowadays, can't forge ahead without being a time-server and a boot-licker, I'll stay back with the people who keep their self-respect. You've outlined my position pretty clearly. And I'm going to make my own way—with the girl I mean to marry."

"Oh, you poor wall-eyed fool!" sighed Blake.

"If I'm a fool," flared Tom, "I inherit it!"

"Of all the senseless come-backs I ever heard," commented Blake disgustedly, "that's about the flattest and silliest! It'd be a dandy clue for a picture puzzle of 'Find the Fool.' However, we understand each other at last—"

"I suppose," broke in Tom, with sulky contrition, "I needn't have said that. I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. Maybe you were right. Perhaps it wasn't such a punk come-back after all. But, of course, it's tough for a man to see his only son throw himself away on a—"

"Steady, dad! I won't stand for that sort of talk about her. Not even from you."

"Whether I say it or not," grumbled Blake, "you know what I think. So what's the difference?"

"When you change your mind," answered Tom, fighting hotly for self-control, "you'll have less to take back."

He jammed on his hat, flung open the door—and confronted a man and a woman who were entering.

The woman—tall, slender, strikingly handsome—darted forward to where Jim Blake stood scowling at his son. And at sight of her the scowl changed to a light that few men had seen—or suspected—in the grim old politician's face.

"Hello, Grace!" he exclaimed in delight. "Gee, but you come like a bunch of sunshine after a Welsh-rabbit nightmare! Stand still and let's look at you! No, don't waste time kissing Tom. He's got other people to kiss."

CHAPTER XIII

BEFORE THE STORM

"IT'S good to get a welcome at last," laughed Grace. "Mark's been as cross as a bear."

"I haven't!" declared Robertson.

"You have!" she insisted. "And just because the train was a few minutes late. Oh, well—a few *hours,* then. When I got in you were stamping up and down the platform surrounded by a blue haze; like Ajax defying the—the B. & O. Really, I was ashamed of you. If it hadn't been for the lovely flowers you got me—"

"What was the delay?" asked Blake.

"I don't know," she answered, laying aside her wraps with Robertson's awkward if eager aid. "The engine made too strenuous an effort to get out of Baltimore. And it broke down. How are you, dad?"

"Oh," grunted Blake, "as well as a man may hope

to be who never can hope to make himself worthy of such a wonderful son. I—"

"Tom!" cried Grace in jolly reproof. "There's been another explosion! What was it, this time? Tell me!"

"Politics," answered Blake before Tom could speak. "I'm a wicked, hopeless, corrupt old guy. And Tom's just discovered it—for the thousandth time. It's hurt his feelings something terrible."

"Nonsense, Tom!" said Grace lightly. "Politics is a game. Not a tragedy."

"Gee!" approved Blake. "I wish you could have been the son, Grace; and Tom the daughter."

"Why do you boys quarrel so foolishly?" she demanded. "Neither of you ever quarrels with *me*. I'm going to be an arbitration committee and a dove of peace, all in one, and settle your grievances—when I get time."

"And, speaking of time," put in Mark, "I ought to be at the Capitol this very minute. Coming?" he asked, turning to Blake and Tom.

"In a little while," said Blake. "You two run on. I want to speak to Grace."

Tom led the way from the room. Mark, following, paused an instant on the threshold.

"By the way, Grace," he called, over his shoulder, "we've asked Standish to come here. It wouldn't do for us to be seen conferring with him at the Capitol or anywhere else in public. If he gets here before we're back, ask him to wait, won't you?"

His wife's back had been turned toward him and she was leaning over a table arranging flowers in a vase. Her voice as she replied was quite indifferent.

"Certainly," she agreed. "Confer all night if you want to, so long as you don't do it loudly enough to keep me awake."

Robertson closed the door, leaving Grace and her father alone together. Noting Blake's scowl, she asked:

"How is the Mullins fight coming on?"

"Twenty-fourth round," he replied. "Both men groggy."

"You'll win, though!" she said; and there was scarce a note of interrogation in her voice.

"It's a way I've got," bluffed her father; loath that the daughter, whose faith in his powers was so

secure, should know of the straits in which he was laboring. "Standish is doing his best to block us. And he thinks he's done it. A lot of other folks think so, too. But I'm fixing up a mine to spring under him to-night. And after the explosion I guess the air will clear for the Mullins bill. But that wasn't what I wanted to speak to you about. It's Tom."

"Tom?"

"Yes. He's in love."

"Is that all? Oh, I see. The quarrel was about that. He came to you for sympathy and—"

"Girl, there's four things no man can get sympathy for. I don't know why, but he can't: having his umbrella stolen; getting his best hat sat on; a toothache; and falling in love. But it happens Tom didn't come looking for sympathy. He just handed me an ultimatum. And it didn't ultimate. That's where I want you to help me."

"Who is she? Do I know her?"

"You've probably seen her here at the Keswick, though I don't suppose you've noticed her. You wouldn't be likely to. She's Wanda Kelly."

"'Not the phone girl?" asked Grace in dismay.

"You win. Real nice, ain't it? Makes an awful hit with me, after all I've done and planned for that boy, to have him tumble into an affair like this."

"But couldn't you make him see reason?"

"You didn't catch what I said, Grace. I've just told you *he's in love.*"

"And you shouted at him and got him stubborn and angry, instead of—?"

"That's right. He and I always blaze up when we get together. The boy takes after his father too much. And he's always trying to strike out in new roads for himself and thinking he knows more than sane folks. Thank goodness, *you* never showed any streak of that, girl. It's crazy for a man to do it. But, for a woman, it's suicide. It's a family failing and I'm grateful that it skipped you."

"But," evaded Grace, "what do you want me to do?"

"Talk to the boy. Talk sense to him. He'll listen to you. You've got a way with you. And you're young. Young folks will always listen to young

folks. They're young themselves, so they think maybe they're hearing wisdom when they listen to one of their own sort. But they *know* all old folks are fools. Tom will come to you for advice. He always does. Advice is a thing every one asks, every one gives—and no one takes. But maybe you can make him see a glimmer of light."

"I'll try. The whole thing is absurd and impossible, of course. And it must be broken up at once. I'll do my best."

"I know you will. You always did. Remember, in the old tenement days, how I used to tell you not to let him wade in the gutter? And you never did. Well, keep him from wading in it now. Explain to him that this Kelly girl's after my money. Tell him she's just a common graf—I mean a designing person. You'll fix it, won't you? Good! Oh, but you're sure a comfort to me, Grace! You're the best ever!"

"Don't worry!" she reassured him. "There are other ways of convincing a man—especially a lover—than by storming at him. You know all about

politics, dad, and you can whip voters and congressmen into line. But Tom needs a different line of attack. And he's going to get it. From me."

"Say!" ejaculated Blake. "I wish there was a man on earth I could turn a ticklish business over to, with the same sureness that I can to you. You've taken a three-ton load off my mind. By the way, do you know anything about this Kelly girl?"

"I've spoken to her once or twice. What about her?"

"She isn't a fool. She's rather pretty, too. She's got a strangle hold on Tom, with the idea that the same strangle hold will choke some of my cash out of my pocket. It won't. Tell Tom so. I tried to tell him. But he got on the stump and made a noise like a spread eagle spurning the home nest. So long! I've got to chase over to the Capitol. We'll all be back in a little while for our confab with Standish. You'll keep him here if he comes before we get back?"

"Yes," she replied a little wearily. "I'll keep him here."

CHAPTER XIV

THE FORLORN HOPE

FOR a minute or so after her father had left her, Grace Robertson busied herself in laying away her hat and furs and in putting a stray feminine touch here and there to various details of the room's disarranged appointments. A man would have said the place was in excellent order. The woman, who had first planned and ordered its setting, instinctively noted the various careless shifts made by unconscious masculine hands in her absence. And she mechanically set about rectifying them.

But another woman could have seen how very mechanical all Grace's movements were. At every step in the hall outside the suite, she paused and seemed to brace herself as for some ordeal. When at last the electric buzzer announced a caller, she moved with perfect calmness to the door, as though to admit a stranger. But at sight of the figure on

the threshold of the opened door, her hard-won composure changed to a frigid stiffness. For the visitor was not Standish.

It was Wanda Kelly.

"May I come in, Mrs. Robertson?" asked the girl nervously, glancing behind her as she spoke.

A cold inclination of the head gave the desired permission. Wanda entered, looked about; then waited while Grace closed the door.

"You know me?" asked the girl.

"I think so," returned Grace, in no measure unbending. "You are Miss Kelly, aren't you? The phone girl down-stairs?"

"Yes. I got one of the boys to mind the switchboard while I came up. Is—is any one in there?" she continued, glancing toward the door that led to the inner rooms of the suite.

"No one," said Grace. "Why do you ask? Is your business with me so very private?"

"Yes. So private that I don't quite know how to begin."

She paused. Grace would give her no assistance; but stood watching the younger woman with the air

of one who coolly waits for a dead-beat to bring the conversation to the begging point.

She felt certain of the reason for Wanda's visit. Her father's tale of Tom's silly love-affair gave her the clue. Wanda had doubtless heard, through Tom, how Blake had received the news of the young man's love. And now the girl had come to try to enlist the sympathy and aid of the woman to whom it was known Jim Blake could refuse nothing.

Contempt for the melodramatic, weakly sentimental appeal, which she was thoroughly prepared to treat as it merited, showed in every line of Grace's face. But Wanda was far too perturbed to note the expression.

"I don't know how to begin," she faltered once more.

"Indeed?" queried Grace.

"You haven't heard anything?" asked Wanda. "They haven't told you? Your father hasn't told you anything about me?"

"Please be more explicit."

"You *have* heard!" exclaimed Wanda. "And yet you can stand there as if nothing had happened."

"Nothing has happened that could cause any of us real nervousness. This boyish folly of my brother's—"

"Your brother's?" echoed Wanda in a bewilderment whose genuineness Grace could not doubt. "Have they dragged *him* into it, too?"

"Miss Kelly," said Grace, "we seem to be talking at cross-purposes. Will you kindly come to the point? What is it you think I have or haven't heard?"

"About their scheme to wreck Mr. Standish—"

"Mr. Standish!"

The exclamation was out before Grace was well aware of it. But she managed, none the less, to give the quickly spoken words a turn of civil inquiry, and her face did not change.

"Yes," hurried on Wanda. "They're digging up the old scandal. They've unearthed it all except the Woman's name. They must get that before they can go ahead. When they get that name they'll use the story to ruin him—and *her*."

"Yes?" returned Grace, her sweet voice bare of emotion and her expression one of polite boredom.

"And why should you come to *me* with this story? I am not interested in the seamy side of politics."

"Don't!" cried the girl. "Don't try to bluff it out like that, Mrs. Robertson. It's gone too far for that. It's life or death for you. They're trying to get the Woman's name out of me. If they can't do that, there are other ways. Unless you can stop them. Now that I've put you on your guard, perhaps—"

"My dear Miss Kelly," said Grace patronizingly, "you seem quite unstrung; and, if you will excuse me for saying so, just a little hysterical and incoherent. As far as I can gather, you appear to be hinting that I may know something of a scandal in which Mr. Standish is implicated and—"

"*Don't* you?" demanded the girl with a suddenness that well-nigh threw the other off her splendid poise.

"Your question is impertinent," reproved Grace. "Kindly—"

"Oh, all right," said Wanda despondently. "If that's the way you take it, it's no business of mine. But you're Tom Blake's sister and I couldn't let you run into the trap without warning you. I've done it.

And I've been called impertinent for my pains. When I first found out it was *you* who were mixed up in the case, I said to myself: 'Let Jim Blake go ahead. Let him hit out in the dark at the Woman, and smash his own heart with the blow. It'll be fair.' Then, I got to thinking it over. And—well, I found I couldn't quite bring myself to pay off my own debts by spoiling another woman's life. I guess I'd be a failure at politics," she ended with a little laugh of self-disgust. "That's all. Good-by."

"And so," said Grace slowly, "you came to *me*—just to help me?"

"What other reason could I have had?" asked Wanda, puzzled.

"You didn't think for an instant," pursued Grace, "that, out of gratitude, I might help you?"

"Help *me?* How?"

"By making it easy for you to carry out your idea of marrying my brother? Perhaps by using this scandal story as a threat to force me into helping you?"

Wanda looked at her for a full half-minute in

blank silence. Then, turning to the door, she said:

"I guess I was a fool to butt in."

"One moment!" interposed Grace; adding, as Wanda paused: "You—you made certain insinuations about me, just now. You must prove them—you must give me your reasons for the absurd supposition that I might know anything about this Standish scandal."

"You mean," suggested Wanda, "how did I find out that you—?"

"No. There was nothing at all to find out. But I want to know how you are going to try to drag me into this. What your supposed grounds may be for—"

"Mrs. Robertson," replied Wanda, her hand still on the door-knob, "I'm not in your class. I don't know just how women in your station of life manage such things. But it seems rather tough that you can't find a way to defend yourself without insulting me. Let that go. You want to know how I found out? I'll tell you. Early this evening Mr. Standish learned of this scheme to wreck him. He knows the story,

couldn't be used without the Woman's name. And Blake bluffed him into believing the machine would have the name before midnight. Mr. Standish's first thought was to warn the Woman. Just as Blake had known it would be. He called up your house in New York—"

"What of that? I was not at home this evening. I was on my way here to—"

"But Mr. Standish didn't know that."

"And," pursued Grace fiercely, "just because Mr. Standish chanced to call up my husband's New York home, you've evolved this insane theory. Mr. Standish wanted to speak with my husband. He—"

"He had just been speaking with him in the hotel corridor."

"What proof is there—beyond your unbacked word—that he called up my house?"

"The time-card at central. A list of all calls is forwarded every evening to central and—"

"That proves nothing!" declared Grace. "Nothing at all. Oh, it's a pretty trick you're playing, Miss Kelly. A very pretty trick. But it will fail. You build it all on the statement that some one

called up the house of Governor Robertson. Fifty people call up our house every day. And on the strength of that, his wife is to be involved in a story of low intrigue—Oh, it's outrageous! Do you suppose a wild story like that would have any other effect than to put you promptly in prison for blackmail?"

"Will Mr. Standish explain to your husband why he called you up?"

"He didn't call me up. Mr. Standish could have had no possible reason to warrant him in telephoning to me. At best, your theory is a miserable blunder. Mr. Standish had nothing to say to me. He'll deny every charge you make. And my word will be believed ahead of a blackmailing phone girl's. I need simply say you tried to gain my help by means of threats to—"

"You need simply *say* it? Will you swear to it?"

"Yes!" flashed Grace. "If the need arises. A woman's reputation isn't destroyed so easily as you seem to think, Miss Kelly."

"And the country hotel proprietor?" asked Wanda. "I forgot to say they've sent for him. He

can identify the Woman who was registered as 'Mrs. Fowler'— He—"

"Do you suppose, for one moment," said Grace, white to the lips, "that my husband would subject me to the indignity of being looked over like a common criminal? I need only tell the truth—deny the whole malicious lie—and—"

"Oh!" broke in Wanda, with reluctant admiration, "you're brave, Mrs. Robertson! As brave as they make them. You're putting up a glorious fight. And I can't help liking you for it. Because I know —behind the brave front—you're *sick* with fear."

"You think—?"

"I *know* it. And—believe me or not—you've got me sized up all wrong. I—I'm not going to marry your brother. But I don't want to see his sister get into this mess. Why won't you trust me? You'll need my help. You'll need every scrap of help you can get from any one. You don't know the danger you're in. For you've never been up against the machine."

"Really—"

"The machine!" rushed on Wanda. "It's got the

brains of all the men that are in it. And none of the heart. It burns up everything that gets in its path. And now it needs a woman's good name and happiness to keep it in fuel. It's only square that you should be the Woman. It'll let them see how other people have felt when the machine crushed them—how my father felt when he came home that horrible day, with death written in his eyes, and said to my mother: 'Molly, I'm done for. Blake and his machine have got me!' That's what he said. And *he* was innocent."

"But—"

"That's why I was going to let them get *you,* and break Jim Blake's vile old heart. It's the chance I've been waiting for, five endless years. I was waiting and hoping and praying for them to strike a trail that would lead to their own graft-bought homes. To-night I saw God's justice begin to move. I saw that Blake and his crowd were working out their own damnation without any help from me. And then—Oh, I'm a fool!—then, all at once I forgot the justice part of it. And all I could see was that a gang of strong, cruel, clever men were fighting one

unhappy woman. I—I guess that's why I've stayed here, even after you called me a blackmailer."

"If there were any truth in your story," answered Grace, and her voice was dead, "you'd surely have your revenge in seeing my father's pride and his life's happiness destroyed—my home broken up—and my brother—"

"Yes," said Wanda. "I thought of your brother, too. I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings by talking as I have about the machine your father controls. Especially since your husband's in it, too. I don't doubt they're all right in their homes. But they're parts of the machine. It's like a gun: all the parts of it are harmless, till they're put together. And then—"

"You're mistaken about me! I know nothing of this Standish scandal. You're trying to trick me into admitting something that isn't true. And you actually think you can succeed in making out a case against me? Don't you see how absurd it is for a girl in your station to try such a trick? My name and position alone are enough to—"

"That's just it," retorted Wanda. "Your name

and position! Those two things take away your only possible excuse for what you did and for what you are doing now! You had what the story books call a 'sheltered life'. You had all the money you could possibly spend. You had everything life could give you. Yet you were tempted. And you went under. Not blindly, either. For you had sense enough to clear your own skirts afterward and to refuse to abide by what you'd done. When a *man* does that, you know well enough what they call him."

"I—"

"I know lots of girls—there are thousands of them in this city—who grind along, year after year, working like slaves, on starvation wages—often going without enough food or clothes or warmth—just to keep themselves straight. For every one of them that loses the fight for decency, there are a hundred that win out and stay clean. The fight kills them sometimes. They can't earn enough cash to live honestly. So they don't live at all. They get consumption from undereating and overworking. And they die—alone—in their cold hall bedrooms. But they've won! They've fought the good fight in

a way that would have sent a lot of those hairy old Roman martyrs tumbling down for the count. They've *won,* I tell you! And that is the kind of girl who knows what temptation really means. Not *your* variety of temptation—gold-plated and velvet lined; but the real sort of temptation—cold iron with steel teeth."

She checked her tirade—a little ashamed of her own vehemence.

"But your past's no business of mine," she went on more quietly. "I just came to give you a warning. Take it or leave it. It's up to you."

"I don't want your warning," said Grace sullenly. "I tell you, I admit nothing."

"Then I can't help you."

"I have not asked your help."

"Just as you like," sighed Wanda. "But the net's closing tight around you, Mrs. Robertson. And if you count on Mr. Standish to help you or to deny anything, you're making a big mistake. The minute he finds himself cornered, he'll throw you over to save his own chances. Oh, won't you drop the bluff, once and for all? Won't you let me—?"

"You have had my answer. There is not one single fact on which to base this—this attack. If you try to drag my name into any unsavory scandal, so much the worse for you. You think I am afraid of you, and of your veiled threats, Miss Kelly? Well, then, if you dare make use of my name—even indirectly—in connection with this case, I shall go to my father, at once and tell him—tell him that—"

"Tell him *what,* Mrs. Robertson?" demanded Wanda.

"That you tried to get me to help you marry Tom. And that when I refused you threatened to blackmail me—to brand me as the Woman he's been hunting for. I—"

A purring of the buzzer interrupted her.

"We will put it to the test *now!*" Grace declared, turning toward the door. "There are my husband and father outside. 'Afraid,' am I? 'Sick with fear?' You shall see. You shall tell them, here and now, that I'm the Woman they're trying to find. Tell them and see what will happen. If you haven't the courage to tell them I'll repeat your charges myself."

"Don't! *Don't!*" implored Wanda, as the buzzer sounded once more. "Don't try it, Mrs. Robertson! You can't carry it through, I tell you. They have too much proof."

"They won't apply their proof to *me*— It is you who will need proofs."

"Very good!" cried Wanda, in sudden anger. "Go ahead and do it. *My* conscience is clear. I wanted to help you and I got insulted for my pains. Go as far as you like. I'm through."

"You are not through yet," denied Grace furiously. "Stay where you are! We'll settle this once and for all."

She threw open the door. Matthew Standish stood waiting on the threshold.

CHAPTER XV

LAUNCELOT OR GALAHAD?

WANDA, with a scared smile of recognition, slipped past Standish and out into the hall.

"My father is expecting you, Mr. Standish," she heard Grace say—in a slightly raised tone, palpably for Wanda's ears. "He told me to ask you to wait for him here in case you should come before he got back from the Capitol."

Then the door closed, and Wanda heard no more.

The moment she was alone with Standish, Grace Robertson's bearing underwent an almost ludicrous change. The air of defiance was lost, leaving her face strangely drawn and haggard. Her muscles relaxed as though a mainspring had snapped. She dropped into a chair and pressed her hands across her burning eyes.

Standish stood, still near the door, looking down at her. His heavy dark mask of a face did not show

any emotion save that its premature lines seemed all at once cut deeper. His somber eyes held no light, his deep voice no expression as he said at last:

"You know, then?"

"Yes," returned Grace, starting up.

"I tried to warn you," said he. "How did you find out?"

"The phone girl. Wanda Kelly."

"I see," he mused. "I ought to have guessed. She is one of the machine's spies."

"No. She wanted to help me, she said. But that isn't the point. She *knows*. And she is the only person who does—"

"What did you say to her when she—?"

"I denied everything, of course. What else was there to do?"

"There was nothing else to do. You were wise—while the affair is in its present state."

"It was wise in any case."

"Yes," he agreed. "It was wise for you. But I suppose you haven't stopped to consider *my* position in the matter?"

"Your position?" she repeated uncertainly.

"What do you mean? What is your position, except to stand by me and save me?"

"Of course," he hesitated, "I'll help you as far as I can. Believe that."

She nodded, reassured. With reassurance came reaction.

"Do you remember," she asked suddenly, "a sermon on Conventionality that you preached to me five years ago? I thought it was rather prosy at the time. But, somehow, I could never quite forget it. And now its wretched prophecies have come true. Do you remember?"

He shook his head.

"I had told you," she went on, "that Conventionality was a silly bogy who scared us into taking long and tortuous roads instead of the easy short cuts. You said each twist in the long road was made by some man ahead who turned aside to avoid the pitfall into which the man in front of him had tumbled. I laughed and said I was going to choose the 'short cut' to happiness. You told me the short cut was white with the bones of people who had done the same thing. And—you said no one could defy Con-

ventionality without sometime hurting the lives of other people besides himself. Well, if it's any comfort to you to know it, you were right."

"It is not a comfort to me," he answered. "I would give my life to save you from the penalty of it all."

He spoke slowly, in a heavy lifeless voice that contrasted oddly with his words. She looked up, startled.

"It won't be necessary to give your life," she replied. "All you need to do is—"

"It would be necessary to give something greater than my life," he corrected. "Something I can not give, because I have no right to."

"What do you mean?"

"You forget that I owe a duty to the men who have made me their leader in this fight; who have staked everything on me."

"And to me?" she cried shrilly. "To the Woman who staked more than everything? Do you owe nothing to *me?*"

"I do not want to think what I owe to you," he

evaded, his voice shaking ever so little. "I beg you not to remind me of it."

"You repudiate the debt, then?" she sneered. "You wish to forget that you owe me—"

"That I owe you a broken life, dead hopes, wrecked faith in women, loss of the one thing that makes this black world worth living in!" he finished. "Yes, I do want to forget it. And out of mercy to you, I repudiate the debt. Please don't let us speak of it again. You left me with nothing in life but an empty career. In order not to go mad with brooding over all that had been stricken from me, I flung myself heart and soul into my work. It is due to you that I am where I am to-day and that the machine is at my mercy. And, now that my work at last is nearing completion, you ask me to renounce that, too. If I alone were concerned I would obey you and go out into the world alone and broken. But I have no right to obey you at the expense of thousands of innocent people who rely on me as their leader and their deliverer."

"You won't help me? You put these miserable

constituents and politicians of yours ahead of *me?*"

"If you put it that way, yes."

"Oh, most noble statesman!" she mocked, raging. "Embodiment of all that is perfect and—contemptible! I didn't marry you because I no longer loved you and because I wouldn't add a blasphemous loveless marriage to my other sin. If I had become your wife—even if it ruined both our lives—you would have felt it your duty to stand by me and defend me against the entire world. But because I had the courage to stop before I made us both miserable for life, you can not in honor protect me! I wonder if you half realize how vile a thing you are!"

He did not answer. Nor did his somber eyes, with their ashes of burned-out fires, falter in meeting her blazing look.

"I wouldn't marry you," she went on, still swept by wrath, "because I didn't love you. And now I see how wise I was. I knew nothing of real love. It wasn't until I met Mark that I really understood. Up to then I'd felt no shame for what I'd done. But when I found I loved him, I saw it all. I went through a hell of shame that has never wholly left

me. I wanted to be cleansed, to be purified, to be worthy. I wanted to tell Mark. I didn't dare. I knew him well enough to be certain he'd turn from me as if I were a leper. He'd do it, even now. No one but a woman can understand what it means to keep a secret from the man she adores. And—in those days I learned to hate you. Yes, to *hate* you. You were part of the one barrier that made me unworthy to be Mark Robertson's wife."

She paused in her furious rambling talk, for Standish's dark face had grown ghastly. Vaguely she wondered why. And as if reading her thoughts, he spoke. There was no thrill, no stir in the slow lifeless depths of his voice:

"I love you. I have never loved any other woman in all my miserable life. I shall keep on loving you as long as I live. I do not want to. But it is past my power. I would sooner have bitten out my tongue than betray this secret of yours. All this can not interest you. I tell you, so that you may know the punishment is not all yours. You merely risk losing what you have gained and cherished during the past few years. *I* act with the certainty that by

doing my duty I must bring ruin and heart-break on the woman whom I love more than I love my own soul. Is my task easier than yours? Doesn't it mean a lifetime of agony to *me?* A lifetime in which to remember that you are unhappy and disgraced, and that I, who would blithely die for you, will have made you so."

The utter ardor of his words, combined with the dull lifelessness of his tone, was almost laughable. Grace was gazing at him in blank astonishment.

"You love me?" she muttered.

"I have told you so," came the slow measured answer. "You talk much of your love for Mark Robertson. It is easy to love when love makes one blissfully happy. But is your love worthy to be compared with mine? With the love that brings only an eternal gnawing anguish—the love that can never hope for one atom of requital and yet that can not die—the love that would sacrifice everything for you and yet must endure sacrificing—you?"

"You love me?" she repeated; and her voice had all at once grown wondrous sweet and vibrant. "You love me—Matt?"

She had drawn closer to him as she spoke. Now she was looking straight up into his wretched eyes; her own glowing like mist-haloed stars. So near to him was she that the chiffon on her breast touched the harsh texture of his coat. Her breath played lightly on his face. The faint fragrance of her hair filled the man's nostrils. The warm magic of her presence dazed him.

Matthew Standish stood, his eyes wide, his breath coming fast, the sweat beads breaking from his forehead. The heavy mask of his face twisted itself into a half-grotesque aspect of pain.

"You love me?" she murmured.

"Yes!" he groaned, his big voice breaking. "God help me! *Yes!*"

"And you won't—you *can't*—destroy my whole future. You *can't,* dear!"

"Ah!"

It was the cry of revulsion that might break from a forest-roamer who had all but trodden on a rattlesnake. He recoiled a step, with a shudder as of physical sickness.

"Was this needed?" he raged. "Was it necessary

to defile my smashed idol still further? Wasn't it enough that you long ago taught me to look on all women as shadows? Why must you turn misery into nausea by playing Delilah? My love was a tragedy. Why must you profane it and make it foul?"

He mastered himself with an effort and fought his way back to the wonted lifeless impersonality that had become to him a second nature.

"Mrs. Robertson," he went on in his customary measured slowness, "the case stands like this: your father and husband are seeking to ruin me by raking up a story of my past. That story involves you. You ask me to protect you. You sink to unspeakable methods to make me do so. I shall protect you as far as I can. I shall do so to the extreme, unless such protection must involve the welfare of the people who trust me. At that point my duty is to them. Not to you. If it were only myself who would be sacrificed—"

"Sacrificed?" she echoed savagely. "Sacrifice is not a monopoly with *you*. I—"

"No. But it is a habit. And I never was forced to exercise it one thousandth as strongly as at this

minute. All over the country, people are hailing me as their champion. They are relying like children on my promise to break the cords of the graft net that has so cruelly bound them. Out of their scanty savings, poor men have denied themselves to contribute their mite to my campaign funds, the funds that were to give them honest clean government. Clergymen have acclaimed me the leader whom God has chosen to lead the people out of political bondage. I could endure the shame of being thrown from the pedestal on which the men have placed me. I could endure to see their admiration turn to ridicule—to note the sorrow of the priests who have held me up to their young men as an ideal of pure manhood. All this I could and would endure, as part of my punishment. But I will *not* stand by meekly and see my life work for my country ruined. I will not betray the trust of millions whose only hope rests on me. This story your father has dug up must not be made public. You understand me? *It must not be made public!* At any cost to myself or to you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, it is clear. Abominably clear. But my own

course is just as clear. I shall deny—*deny—deny!* For five years I have been rebuilding my life. And I am not going to have it ruined now. I've paid! Oh, I've paid a thousandfold. I have paid my debt in the most terrible coin that was ever struck from torture's mint—in *fear!* Fear of losing my husband's love and his respect. Fear that I might fall ill and blurt out the horrible truth in my delirium. Fear that some one who saw us during that week might chance to confront me again. Once, in a theater, a voice at my elbow said 'Good evening, Mrs. Fowler'. It sent a knife of horror to my very heart. The greeting was meant for another woman. But I was ill for days afterward. Oh, I've *paid!* I've paid every time my husband has kissed me. Every time he has said to me the foolish divine things that lovers say—I felt as though I were secretly killing a child who worshiped me."

"I know," began Standish sadly.

But she would none of his sympathy.

"I have prepared, hour after hour, for just this sort of crisis," she continued. "I have schooled and steeled and rehearsed myself for it. And now that

it's come I can go through with my part—I can and I *shall*. Why," she blazed forth, her voice rising, strident and fierce, "do you suppose I'm going to throw away the wonderful happiness I've fought so hard to win and to hold? The happiness I've bought at a price that would have killed any other woman? I deserve that happiness. It is *mine*. And I am going to keep it. I know what real love is, now. And it is too precious to lose. Oh, if only I had known in time!—I suppose," she caught herself up with a mirthless laugh, "I suppose millions of women have wished that."

"I am sorry," said Standish. "Sorrier than you can know—or care. But I have no right to think of either your happiness or mine. If I am beaten in this fight it means infinitely more than the ruin of my own career. It means the ruin of my cause. We won't be able again for years to put up so strong a fight as we can to-day. It is the welfare of the people that is at stake. Perhaps, indirectly, the future of my country itself."

"Then," she asked in tired desperation, "what do you mean to do?"

"Nothing at all," he returned, "so long as your father and husband keep this story quiet."

"But surely they won't publish it without knowing my—the Woman's name?"

"That is what I'm beginning to be afraid of. They may feel so absolutely certain of learning the name later, that they will circulate the story on the floor of the house to-night and in to-morrow's newspapers. And then, when they find out who the Woman really is, it will be too late to suppress it. They will have told too much to be able to deny anything afterward. And the reporters will find out the rest. No, the story must be stopped at once. I don't care how or by whom. You have tremendous influence with your father. You must stop that story. If it gets out I shall lose the fight. And I can not do that, even to save you."

"In other words," she retorted, "to save yourself you will hide behind me?"

"If you care to put it so."

"But," she urged, "I can't speak to father or Mark about it. I'm not supposed to know anything about it. Suppose—suppose I *can't* stop it?"

"You must. It's the only chance. They're delaying the house proceedings this minute just to get their proofs in order to launch the story to-night. They intend to use it to prevent my certain victory. And they must *not.* At the first sign that they mean to do so I shall have to go to your father and tell him who the Woman is! I would rather be shot. But—"

"Oh," she burst out hysterically, "you wouldn't —you *couldn't*—do that! You're not so unutterably low as to damn the future of a woman who once trusted you—who—"

"I've told you," he replied, "that I am not in this fight as a man, but as a *leader.* It is one woman's good name against the welfare of a nation. I haven't the *right* to protect you, Grace. I won't let my sin as a man defeat the great principles I stand for."

"You coward! You pitiful hypocritical coward," she raged. "You haven't the manhood to stand by your own past. You'll let a woman pay your debts —and pay them with everything that makes her life worth living. In all these years I've felt that if a moment like this should ever come, I could rely on

your honor. I've always believed you would at least—what is the old phrase?—'perjure yourself like a gentleman!' "

"Don't you suppose I realize all that? If there were any way of saving you, I'd do it. There *is* no way. I may be a coward— But I've the courage to do what I know is the right thing."

"Is it right to betray a woman's secret for your own advancement?"

"Is it right to double-cross the men whom I've taught to look to me for help?"

"It's easy enough," she flashed, "to save yourself and call it a duty to the people. A coward can always find an excuse. Oh, I could carry it all through safely, even now, if only you were a man instead of a block of stone."

"It is too late now for reproaches," he answered. "For years I've been building up a fighting strength —waiting for the people's chance of victory. And that chance has come. If they lose, it shall not be because of their leader. I—"

"A woman's reputation is worth more than any mere political victory."

"Then," he commanded, "tell your father and husband so. They are preparing to wreck a woman's life to save themselves. No code of honor stands in *their* way. They are out to win. To win at any price. And it is only fair that the filthy methods they use should come back on their own heads. If *some one* must be betrayed, why should it be the innocent? Why not the Woman who is—guilty?"

"Matt!" she wailed, her defense all swept away, in a breath, "if you let my husband know—do you realize what it would mean? It would mean a separation—a divorce—disgrace—everlasting disgrace! Am I to pay that price for your victory?"

"That is for you to decide. I simply warn you not to let your husband and father move against me on these lines. That is all. Good-by. I will come back later to see Mr. Blake."

"Wait!" she begged. "There is one thing you *can* do—one thing you *must* do. It won't endanger your success. My father and Mark and some other men are coming here for a conference. I want you to meet them and to urge them not to use this horrible story—"

"It would be useless," he objected, though moved in spite of himself, by her absolute brokenness. "It would do no good."

"I won't believe that," she protested. "They must have some feeling of chivalry, some sense of mercy. You can be eloquent when you choose. If you put it to them in the right way and appeal to their manhood—they may consent to—"

"There isn't one chance in a hundred," he said. "But I'll try it if you want me to. Only—don't build on the hope. For it will fail. These men are like bloodhounds on the trail of this Woman. You've had no glimpse of that side of them. You'll see it to-night. And then you'll see how hopeless any appeal to their better decenter selves must be."

"But you'll try—?"

"I'll try. I promise you. I'll try my best. And I will guard your secret as long as it *can* be guarded. Until there is no other possible chance. Then—well, this story must be stopped. That is all. It is a waste of words for me to say how sorry I am to have made you so unhappy to-night. Good-by."

He was entirely master of himself now: cold, im-

personal, phlegmatic. No one seeing him take his leave at the door of the Robertson suite would have guessed his brain contained a solitary thought beyond the possible winning of a move in his cherished political game.

The moment Standish was gone, Grace collapsed. She sank down beside the desk table, helpless to move or think. Everything was in a black whirl. Nothing came to her from the wild chaos save the insistent fact that her hour was at last upon her. The hour which for years she had dreaded; for which she had so long and so carefully prepared.

And now—after all her cleverly-reared defenses had been ready and in perfect preparation against attack—those defenses were crumbling to ashes. Vaguely she recalled something Standish had once said about the folly of saving the anchor after the ship was wrecked.

She moved convulsively. The motion brought her hand in contact with the cold metal of the telephone on the table before her. And with the touch came inspiration. Catching up the instrument she unhooked the receiver.

"Miss Kelly," she called tremulously. "Is that you? You know my voice. I—I am alone here—Can you come, please? At once. I *must* see you—Oh, thank you— At once, please."

She rose unsteadily to her feet, as might a half-senseless pugilist who will not yet give up a hopeless fight.

CHAPTER XVI

AN ODD ALLIANCE

THE sound of a step in the hall outside brought Grace to the door. She opened it stealthily, as though bent on some mission of dire peril. And, as stealthily, Wanda slipped into the room, closing the door behind her. The two women faced each other in silence. It was Grace who spoke first.

"I—I sent for you, Miss Kelly," she began uncertainly, "because—because—oh, I'm hemmed in everywhere! I don't know which way to turn!"

"I see," said Wanda quietly. "Standish is going to throw you over to save himself? I was afraid so."

"I—I said some cruel—abominable things to you a little while ago, Miss Kelly," stammered Grace. "Won't you forgive me? You see, I was fighting for my very life. I'm sorry."

"Do you mean that?" asked Wanda with painful directness, "or do you say it because you happen to need my help?"

"I mean it," repeated Grace, too broken to resent the query. "I mean it. Because—whether you'll help me or not—I'm afraid it's all over with me. You were right. I can't fight the machine."

"That's all right," Wanda hastened to answer in quick contrition. "I didn't mean to say anything nasty. I was still a bit sore, I guess. I'm not, any more."

"All those things you said about—about temptation—were just," went on Grace. "But I ask you now not to be just. The world will show enough justice without your joining in. The way you looked at me a while ago showed me what my life will be when people know. I don't want justice from you. It's mercy I'm begging for. Mercy and —help. I'm not a wicked woman, Miss Kelly. I'm not. For God's sake, don't judge me with the fearful justice of the pure! If I did wrong I'm being made to suffer enough now to satisfy the most rigid saint. It *was* wrong. I see it at last. Yes, and I saw it long ago. I've tried to 'go and sin no more'. But they won't let me. And when my husband finds out, he will despise me. Just as *you* do. He won't

understand it was because I loved him that I couldn't tell him. I wanted his love and his respect. And so I had to wrong him to keep his love. I had to cheat him to keep his respect. And the more I loved him the more I hated myself."

"You love him like *that?*" questioned Wanda, coming a step nearer, the hard light dying from her big eyes.

"That is what makes it so terrible. You don't know what it is to realize that even confession is denied you—that the friends who care for you would shun you if they knew the truth—that the man you adore doesn't love *you,* but a wonder-woman whom he thinks is you. That is what I've been going through ever since I met my husband. Do you wonder I fought to keep my secret?"

"I'm sorry I was cranky," said Wanda impulsively, "and I guess I understand all about it. I thought first that Fate had let me in on this so that I could show you up. But I think now it was so I could be of some use to you. You see, there's only we two women. And we've got to fight that whole crowd."

"You'll help? You'll stand by me?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Mrs. Robertson. You've paid for all you did. And I don't want you to pay any more. You're a ten times better woman this minute than a lot who have the law on their side. So forget all that and let's see what we can do."

Grace, to Wanda's dismay, broke down and sobbed in hopeless wretchedness.

"Don't! Don't!" pleaded the girl. "We'll—oh, dear!" a sob choking her. "Now you've got *me* going! We must brace up and *do* something. There's plenty of spare hours for crying. But this isn't one of them. We've a bunch of trouble ahead of us. But we're going to win out. So let's get busy."

"Yes," panted Grace, striving to regain some sort of control over her tears, "I've fought too long to give up yet. What are you doing?"

"Locking the outer door in case any one should butt in. Now, where shall we begin? With Standish?"

"Yes. It's he that I'm afraid of. He says—"

"You're right. He's the greatest danger. We may be able to get away with the rest, somehow. But if they get Standish's back to the wall, he'll tell to save himself!"

"He told me he would," assented Grace. "Oh—"

"But if I've sized him up right," went on Wanda, "he won't tell unless he has to—and they've got to be sure of landing the Woman before they go ahead. They don't dare to move without having her name. And they don't dare wait to get it. There's some fireworks due here to-night, I'm thinking."

"They know you have the clue to my name—"

"The phone number? Yes. They know I have. But I've held them off. And they'll think of some easier way to get it before they tackle me again."

"But what other ways could they try?"

"By this time, most likely, they've applied to central for all the numbers called up from this hotel since seven o'clock to-night. We have to turn in our calls to central, you know. And one of those numbers will be the one they want. But it'll be hard for them to find which one. Yours would be the very one they wouldn't think of."

"Can't we stop them from getting the list?"

"No. Their pull is too strong. But it'll take time to run all the numbers down. And time's the one thing they haven't got. They may have to come to me, after all. I can make them lose some more time, if they do, by making them think I'm holding out for a price. *Time!* That's our one card. They want to use this story to-night. If we can keep them from doing that—"

"If worst comes to worst," exclaimed Grace, "I can go to my father and tell him. He loves me enough to keep it from every one. Even from Mark. It'll break his heart. But it will stop the story."

"No," decided Wanda, after a moment's thought, "it's too late for that. The thing's gone too far. Van Dyke and your husband and the rest are as keen for the name as he is. If he pretended to weaken or tried to stop them now, they'd push on in spite of him."

"Then we've got to work alone. We've got to keep them from finding out. We've got to! *We've got to!*"

"I'd give seven dollars to know what they're doing now," mused Wanda. "It's tough to work in the dark like this."

"Suppose," suggested Grace, in sudden dread, "suppose they try to force you to tell? They're clever—and they're merciless. And—"

"They'll have a sweet time. I'd like a colored photograph of the bunch of men who can make me talk if I don't want to. No, no! Don't you worry about that, Mrs. Robertson. I only wish they'd try it. I could make them lose barrels of time working over me."

"It wouldn't be as easy as you think, I'm afraid. They are so determined—so—"

"Yes, I suppose it would be liable to spoil the evening for them and make them real peevish. But it would take up a lot of time they haven't got. Let them have a try at cross-questioning me if they like."

"You won't let them break you down? Oh, I've no right to allow you to endanger your welfare for me! When they find you won't tell, they may—"

"Don't let that keep you awake, Mrs. Robertson. I know I'm taking chances in bucking the machine.

Lord knows what they'll do to me. But it's worth the risk. And I'm going to stand by you till the cows come home. We—"

A rattling, as some one in the hall tried the outer door of the suite, brought both women to their feet in wordless fear. Then Mark Robertson's voice reached them.

"Grace!" called Robertson from the hall. "Are you asleep? The door's locked."

"This way," whispered Grace, pointing to the inner rooms of the suite. "Go down the passage. There's another door at the end of it, leading out into the hall."

"All right," whispered Wanda in reply. "Good luck to you. Keep your nerve. That's the main thing. Just keep your nerve."

"Grace!" called Mark impatiently.

Grace crossed to the locked door, paused a moment until she heard the door at the far end of the suite open and close, then unlocked the outer door.

"Did you fall asleep?" asked Mark, as he came in. "How did the door happen to be locked?"

"I didn't know I'd locked it," replied Grace. "It

was careless of me. It seems I'm fated this evening to keep you waiting. First at the station. Then—"

"It's queer," interrupted Mark. "I could have sworn I heard a woman's voice—not yours—talking in here, just as I tried the door. Probably it was in the next suite."

"Probably. I'm all alone. And I'm not given to soliloquy. How is the fight going?"

"Badly. But we'll win. We're delaying until we can get certain material we need. We can hold off for several hours yet, by forcing roll-calls and all that kind of thing."

"When do you expect the others?"

"They'll be here in a minute. I came on ahead. I'm a fool, I suppose. But whenever you're in Washington, every minute I'm not with you seems time lost. So I made some sort of an excuse and hurried on. Why," he asked in sudden alarm, "what's the matter?"

CHAPTER XVII

A WASTED PLEA

GRACE started guiltily at her husband's troubled question. He took her face between his hands and raised it to the light.

"You're ill!" he exclaimed in quick dread. "You look actually ghastly. Shall I send for a doctor?"

"What nonsense!" she laughed. "I'm all right. Just a little tired. A good night's sleep will put me on my feet again."

"But you are so pale and your eyes are so strange. I never saw you like this before. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Of course I am. How silly of you to worry just because a long railroad trip leaves me a little bit tired!"

"I've buried myself so deep in politics," he growled self-accusingly, "that I hadn't sense enough to remember that you might be worn out and might

want to go to bed. But I didn't notice that you looked badly at the station. It wasn't till just now when the light happened to strike your face— Oh, but I'm glad to see you here again, sweetheart!"

"Really?" she asked almost timidly; drinking in her husband's words as a condemned man might gaze on his last sunset.

"Glad?" he cried. "Indeed I am. I'm afraid I'll never get past the honeymoon stage. You don't want me to, do you?"

"What a question to ask a woman!" she exclaimed in an effort at lightness.

"It's queer," went on Mark, drawing her to him. "We've been married three whole years—and yet, every day I'm more and more in love with you. You've grown to mean more to me than ambition and everything else."

To his dismay, she buried her face in his shoulder and shook with a spasm of uncontrollable weeping.

"What is it?" he implored—awkward, manlike—in his eager solicitude. "You *are* ill! What is it, darling? Tell me!"

"Why," she laughed hysterically, "I'm unstrung,

I suppose, for some reason or other. And what you said broke me down for a minute. That's all. I'm ashamed to be so babyish."

"That's the woman of it," he said, holding her close to him and smoothing her hair. "To cry because you've made a man impossibly happy. It looks as if *you* hadn't quite got beyond the honeymoon stage, either."

"I wonder," she faltered, "—if you'd never met me—if you'd—"

"I'd never have known what I missed. That's where nature is kind. People who miss the real love never know. We only know when we've found it."

"But," she pursued, "when people find out too late—afterward— That's the bitterest thing in life, I should think. It isn't easy to judge people—women, especially—who find out too late—and—and who try then to get their birthright of happiness in spite of everything."

"Such people have lost their claim to the birthright," he answered. "They've sold it for a mess of pottage. That's one of the problems of the ages,

Grace. And man has made laws to govern it. Laws that are wise and—"

"And often bitterly cruel."

"Laws are for the many. Not for the few. And the few must obey them for the good of the many. But I didn't give the rest of the crowd the slip, just to bore you by discussing ethics. Was it foolish of me to run away, simply to have a few extra minutes with you? I've been fighting so hard—"

"And fighting *fairly,* too, I know. Dear, you'd never take an unfair advantage of—"

"No advantage is unfair in politics. Every advantage is considered a legitimate weapon. But there we go arguing ethics again! I—"

"But," she insisted, "surely it's finer to fight fairly, to—"

"Politics," answered Mark, "is *war.* And war is the science of finding the weakest spot in your enemy's armor and hammering away at it till he yields. For instance, we've just found the weakest sort of spot in Standish's armor and—"

"You have? What is it?"

"There are only two weak spots in most men's armor. One is money crookedness. The other is women. In Standish's case it was a woman. An affair he got tangled up in five years ago."

"And you'll stoop to use such a weapon as that?" she cried indignantly.

"Why not? He'd use the same sort of weapon against *us,* fast enough; if he had it."

"But that isn't fair fighting, Mark. It's disgusting scandal."

"That's his lookout, not ours. If he chanced to know something damaging in *my* private life, he'd use it in a minute."

"But, Mark!" she pleaded, "you're a bigger, wiser, greater man than he is. For my sake, don't lower yourself to his level by such tricks as that! Don't let father and the others do it."

"It isn't a pleasant task," admitted Robertson. "And it's not the kind I enjoy. But we've got to use what comes to our hands. We've got to win. That makes it necessary to—"

"But if *I* asked you—if I begged you—"

"Don't ask me, dear. This is one of the things

you don't understand. You'll have to leave it to me."

"Perhaps," she retorted desperately, "I may understand it far better than you do. You say there's a woman concerned in it. This scandal will pillory her and—"

"That type of woman belongs in the pillory."

"Don't! You have no right to judge. What can you know of her? You say this was five years ago. Perhaps she has repented and is trying to live down what she did. Are you going to rob her of her one chance—just to win a political battle?"

"Dear," he said gently, "you know nothing about women of that kind. It's mainly in story books that they 'try to live down' the past. In real life, nine times out of ten, they go from bad to worse. Where one woman has the courage and the character to retrieve a false step, fifty haven't. Most people realize that. That's why they blame the man who is the cause of the first step. And that is why the people will repudiate Standish when they are told he was the cause—"

"You are cruel!" she cried. "You yourself admit

that there is a chance the Woman may have repented. Are you going to refuse her the benefit of that chance?"

"The chance is too small to be considered. Don't let's talk of it. You can't—"

"Then," she continued, unheeding, "there's something else you don't consider. She may have married. She may be the wife of some honorable man who loves her and thinks she is perfect. All his heart and all his ideals may be bound up in her. Are you going to ruin *his* life, too?"

"Dear," sneered Mark, "the sort of fool who marries women of that kind (like the man who teaches his wife to be a 'dead game sport') deserves what he gets. And generally he gets it. Though, in both cases, he doesn't always find it out. Don't waste sympathy on him. If he married her he probably knew what she was. If he didn't know, it's time he learned. No sane man should want to live in a fool's paradise."

"But her family! Her parents? Her brothers or sisters? Surely *they* aren't to blame. And they will be disgraced, too."

"Such things are rather apt to run in families. Cankered flowers don't grow from clean roots. You're wasting a lot of sympathy over a woman and a man who are unworthy to speak your dear name. There are your father and the rest, getting out of the elevator now. Go to bed, dear girl, and try to get a good rest. You're looking more and more fagged out every moment. We'll try not to talk loudly enough to disturb you. Don't sit up for me. I'll probably be up all night on this Standish affair. Good night, sweetheart."

As he bent to kiss her, her arms clung to his neck like a frightened child's. She tried to speak, faltered, and hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

SIXTY SECONDS LEEWAY

IN they trooped, Jim Blake at their head—Van Dyke, Neligan, Gregg, and (sulkily bringing up the rear) Tom. Grace had quitted the library at her husband's order. And kissing her good night, with a parting reiteration of her need for a sound sleep, Mark had closed the door behind her.

Now, starkly unashamed of the eavesdropper's rôle, Grace Robertson was standing tense, expectant, her ear to the closed door leading to the inner rooms. Through the thin panel she could hear every syllable from the library. Reckless of the chance that her presence might be detected through a possible opening of the door, powerless to move or to do aught but listen with strained ears, she crouched there. Her own name was the first word she caught.

"Grace turned in?" Jim Blake was asking; and Robertson replied:

"Yes. She's all tired out. We can talk freely here. No one will interrupt. Sit down. The cigars are over there. And here's the Scotch."

"Has Standish been around yet?" queried Van Dyke.

"Oh, he'll be here all right," vouchsafed Blake, before Mark could answer. "He knows we've got him in a hole. He'll—"

"But have we?" argued Van Dyke. "As far as I can see, it's still the other way around."

"Don't you lose sleep over that," counseled Blake. "I'm not worried. And if *I'm* not, there's no need for you boys to be. I wish your Wall Street crowd could annex all the worry I haven't got. Just the same, Van Dyke, when you get back, ask them what the devil they mean by jamming down our throats such a raw proposition as the Mullins bill, at a time like this. And tell them they're worse idiots than the guy who killed the golden-egg goose—"

"I think I see myself saying that to the old man!" chuckled Van Dyke. "He'd—"

"Well, *I'll* say it to him," growled Blake. "And if he doesn't like it he can—"

"In the meantime," hurriedly interposed Van Dyke, to check any further expression of blasphemy against his golden god, "we're held up. For how much longer? There isn't a minute to throw away."

"It's bad enough to be delayed by anything," fumed Mark. "But it's ten times worse when we're blocked by a damned little—by the person who got this information," he corrected himself, catching a warning glint from Blake's half-shut eyes.

"Whatever the price is," suggested Gregg, "I say: pay it! Pay it and save time."

"No," contradicted Blake, his glance shifting as if by accident to Tom. "Her—the—the price is too high."

"Too high?" snorted Neligan on whom the undercurrent of Blake's refusal was entirely lost. "It's the first time we've ever economized."

Before Blake could reply the buzzer sounded.

"There's Standish, now," said Jim. "Maybe he'll save us the trouble by throwing up the sponge—if we work him right. Let him in, Neligan. Take the lead from me, all of you. And don't disgrace me by acting like wild asses of the desert."

Neligan, in obedience to his chief, had opened the outer door. Standish, after a quick and seemingly indifferent look that itemized the room's occupants, walked forward. Neligan carefully closed the door behind him.

The men nodded stiffly, uncomfortably, in response to the visitor's slight bow.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Standish pleasantly. "This setting of the stage seems to suggest Daniel in the lions' den. I hope none of you has made the error of casting *me* for the rôle of Daniel."

Neligan's lips flew apart with the force of a retort that leaped to them. But the words were never formulated. For Blake, beaming on the newcomer like a father upon his dearest loved son, exclaimed affectionately:

"Why, how are you, my boy? How *are* you? Take a chair. Neligan, get him a—"

"Thanks," declined Standish. "I can talk better on my feet."

"Oh!" deprecated Blake, in pathetic disappointment. "You've come to talk? I was hoping you had come to—"

"To lie down?" supplemented Standish.

"Well," answered Blake oracularly, "the man who lies down can get up again. But the man who is *knocked* down, is apt to take the count."

"The question is this, Mr. Standish," broke in Mark, impatient at his father-in-law's slower method of reaching the point. "Will you support us, or will you not?"

"I will not," returned Standish.

"Or at least resign your leadership?"

"No. I thought we had settled all that."

"Then," asked Van Dyke, "you are prepared to take the consequences, Mr. Standish?"

"If there are consequences—yes."

"Oh, there'll be consequences, all right," Blake assured him. "Hell's full of 'consequences'. So you won't even protect the Woman?"

"You haven't found her yet."

"No?" smiled Blake. "Son, I told you there was a trap. Well, it caught her. And we'll have her name in half an hour at most. Probably sooner. If you think *that's* a bluff, you're welcome to. But you've only a half-hour to keep on thinking it."

"Look here, gentlemen," said Standish, turning to the others. "All this does not interest me in the least. I came here to-night for just one reason—to appeal to your sense of justice."

A ripple of derision from his hearers stirred his slow voice to slightly faster measure.

"You can't beat me," he went on. "And you know it as well as I do. I am secure. But, for the sake of others, I ask you not to make political capital out of something in my private life."

Gregg's loose mouth parted in a grin. Neligan laughed aloud. But Mark Robertson could see no humor in the situation.

"You're wrong, Standish," he declared. "This scandal will beat you."

"Let us suppose, for argument's sake, that it would," agreed Standish. "Can't I appeal to your honor? Won't you fight fairly?"

"We'll publish the truth," retorted Mark. "If that's unfair."

"It *is* unfair. If not to me, then to the *Woman.*"

"It is too late to go into that matter now, Mr. Standish. Your very presence here to-night is, by

itself, strong proof against you; if further proof were needed."

Standish made a gesture of weary impatience.

"Proof?" he echoed. "*I* don't deny the story. You wouldn't dare use it if you couldn't prove it. But, gentlemen, there comes a time—even in politics—when we've got to be men first and politicians afterward."

"Then," suggested Blake, "*be* a man. Give up the fight."

"No," replied Standish, "I won't be blackmailed. This affair was over and done with before I asked the people to accept me as their leader. Long before. It has no bearing on my present fitness."

"That's your misfortune," sneered Mark. "The people have a right to know who represent them. In the newspaper articles we have prepared, there are no facts we can not prove: your affair with the Woman—your failure to carry out your pledge to marry her—"

"Then the story is written?" exclaimed Standish.

"It is in type," put in Van Dyke, "and waiting our word to send it out to the whole country."

"I see," mused Standish. "And I see how such a story will be handled in print. You'll use every trick of suggestion, every fact inferring a lie—"

"And," cried Mark, "it will beat you. It will *beat* you, man—and that's what we've been working for, for years."

"I'm not beaten yet," retorted Standish. "And I advise *you,* Governor Robertson, to be careful—"

"Oh, we shall be careful," returned Van Dyke. "The proprietor of the hotel is coming to-night. The hotel where Mr. and Mrs. Fowler were registered. We may not need him to identify her. But he'll be on hand in case we do. Take my word for it, Mr. Standish, you'll save a great deal of unnecessary trouble if you'll quietly step down and out."

"If I did," said Standish, "I would be politically dead. You know that."

"You're politically dead, anyway," insisted Mark. "If this story will beat you to-night it will beat you twenty years from to-day. Particularly if this Woman proves to be—what shall we call it?—a trifle off color?"

"Robertson!"

"Ah! That hurts, does it? Then it's probably true. If the Woman is the kind that—that would not do you credit, you can understand how much more effective it will be."

"You are wrong!" denied Standish. "She is of good family. She—"

"She may have been a good woman when you found her," said Mark. "But there must have been a bad streak in her, somewhere. And it will have shown before now. You deserted her. You left her to sink as low as I expect to find her and—"

"Drop that, Mark!" burst out Tom Blake, jumping from his seat and confronting his brother-in-law. "Don't! I can't listen to it any longer. Standish is right. What you men are doing is vile. If you've got a scrap of manhood left in the whole bunch of you, you won't drag this Woman into your dirty schemes. I—"

"Oh," drawled Blake with the air of a sleepy man bothered by a fly, "for the love of Mike, don't *you* butt in! The situation's punk enough as it is, without your laying your trophies of idiocy at its feet."

"Idiocy?" flared Tom. "Perhaps common decen-

cy's a better term. Or perhaps in your vocabulary the two mean the same thing. You men are known as political leaders. The public looks to you for examples. And yet you stoop to a currish trick like this! Isn't there enough whiteness in the whole lot of you for a single voice to protest against such use of a woman's name? You've just been told she's of good family. That she has a name to lose. And you answer: 'Political necessity!' You know this story will destroy at least two lives. Probably several more. And again you answer: 'Political necessity!' You have the power to ruin these lives. If you use that power, I tell you now, one and all—my father as well as the rest—I'm ashamed to have breathed the same air with you!"

"Say!" roared Neligan. "Look here! You'll—"

"Sit down, Neligan," drawled Blake. "One fool's enough for a single room."

"This isn't a debating society, Tom," added Robertson. "We'll do as we think best. And—"

"Then," broke in Standish, "I warn you—"

But Tom's torrent of noisy rage had not yet exhausted itself.

"I'm through with the lot of you!" he raged. "I've stood for all this filthy work I'm going to. If the winners have to use such means as these, I'd rather count in with the losers. Mr. Standish, if this foul story comes out, it may cost you some support, but it will gain you *mine*. And, dad—"

"Good night, Tom," drawled Blake, not so much as troubling to glance in his irate son's direction.

"No," corrected Tom, "good-*by*."

"It's up to you," yawned Blake.

"Good-by!" reiterated Tom, stamping from the room and slamming the outer door of the suite behind him.

The others stared after him in dull wonder. But an exclamation from their host suddenly shifted their attention.

"Grace!" cried Mark in surprised disapproval.

She had come, unnoticed, from her hiding-place behind the inner door and was standing among them before they were aware of her presence.

"Mark!" she panted. "I—I heard what Tom said. And he was right. You must not—"

"Please keep out of this, Grace," requested her

husband in dire embarrassment. "You don't know anything about it. You couldn't possibly—"

"I do," she denied. "I've heard. And—"

"Grace, dear girl," soothed Blake. "This is muddy business at best. It's no time for you to be here. You'll only soil those pretty hands of yours."

"It *is* the time for me to be here!" she declared. "I can see this from the Woman's standpoint. You men can't."

"There is nothing in common between your standpoint and that of the Woman we are talking about," protested Mark.

"Tom was right!" she persisted. "You must not sink to using this story. If—"

The whirr of the buzzer interrupted her. At such high tension were they all that the sound made them turn as though to confront a physical presence. Neligan strode to the door, conferred for an instant with some one outside, then returned with a slip of blue paper in his hand.

"The duplicate list of phone numbers from central," he announced, turning over the paper to Van Dyke.

"Good," approved Blake. "Now we'll get to what we're chasing. And we'll get it mighty quick."

Van Dyke and Neligan were already poring over the sheet of numbers that the lawyer had just spread on the table under the lamp.

"Now, then, Standish," exulted Robertson; "we're ready to begin. One of these numbers leads directly to the Woman. We'll put a man to work tracing each one of them. In a few hours at longest we will have what we want. And when we find the Woman we'll lay bare every soiled page in her life and in yours. If the story turns out to be disgraceful it won't be our fault," he added, in surly apology to Grace, who stood staring dumbly at the numbered list under the lamp-glare.

It was Standish who broke the moment's silence.

"Very well, Robertson," he said calmly. "I've done what I promised to do. And I have failed. You drive me now to the use of your own weapons. I shall have to fight exposure with exposure."

"No, no!" moaned Grace, incoherent with fear.

Mark Robertson had caught up Standish's defiance and had stepped forward to confront him.

"In other words, Mr. Standish," he demanded, "you threaten *me?* That's an empty threat. There is nothing in my life you have not already shouted from the housetops."

"Don't be too sure," warned Standish, meeting Mark's scornful glare with unconcern.

"What do you mean? Speak up!"

"Mr. Standish!" pleaded Grace. "I beg—"

"Don't worry, dear," said Mark. "Let him bluff. I'll call him. Mr. Standish, I give you full permission to use any weapon that I use. If you know anything against me, tell it here and now. Here, in my wife's presence. You know our cards. Show yours."

Standish's gaze strayed, as if by chance, to Grace's ghastly face.

"Well?" urged Mark. "Speak up! We're waiting!"

At sight of the mortal terror in Grace's eyes, Standish checked the words that were on his lips. Turning away from the domineering man who so truculently confronted him, he muttered:

"I'll choose my own time!"

"I thought so!" scoffed Mark. "You're licked. This is your last fight. From to-night you're a dead man, politically. And if we have to hunt out a woman or two to keep you dead, we'll do it."

Van Dyke had glanced from the telephone list to his watch.

"We've just time enough to catch the last editions of the morning papers," said he. "I told Jennings to hold a wire ready—"

"What?" exclaimed Standish. "You'll go ahead without the Woman's name?"

"Yes," answered Van Dyke. "Since we've an absolute certainty, now, of getting it. We can afford to do that and publish the name to-morrow. That will be time enough. We're in time for New York and Boston and Chicago and St. Louis. Mark, get the Associated Press on the wire. Tell Jennings to send out the story. Tell him we're holding the Woman's name and that we won't give it out unless Standish denies the story. By the time he can get his denial in print we'll have the name."

"Good!" asserted Robertson, catching up the telephone. "Hello! Give me—"

"Mark!" begged Grace. "Oh, I implore you—don't—"

"4400 Main."

"No, no!" reiterated Grace wildly, turning from him to Blake. "Father! You won't allow this? Please! For my sake—!"

"Hello!" Mark was calling into the transmitter. "That you, Jennings? This is Robertson. Is that Standish story ready? All right—Can you surely get in for the morning papers?—Last editions, eh? —All right—Yes—In the big cities—What's that?"

"Mr. Standish!" appealed Grace brokenly.

"Blake!" exclaimed Standish. "You don't dare publish that story without the Woman's name."

"In less than five minutes," retorted Blake, glancing at the clock, "it'll be too late for the morning papers. We'll take a chance."

"Remember!" answered Standish with sudden vehemence, "I warn you—"

"What's that, Jennings?" Mark was calling over the wire. "Yes. I tell you I am Robertson and I am speaking for Mr. Blake. What do you say you want? I can't catch it?"

"Blake!" continued Standish. "I warn you I'll deny the story. And if you get the Woman's name you'll—"

"Deny it, will you?" drawled Blake. "Hell! You haven't time to get a wire before they go to press. The story'll be all over America before your denial can leave Washington. And you know what that means. 'Truth crushed to earth will rise again,'—but before it gets on its feet, the lie that knocked it over will have traveled half the way around the world."

"I tell you," Mark was roaring into the transmitter, "that I'm speaking on Mr. Blake's authority. Oh, all right, then! Hold the wire. Jim," he went on, turning to Blake, "Jennings says he won't send out that story without your personal orders. He knows your voice. He says if you'll tell him, over the phone, that it is all right, he'll go ahead. Hurry. There's only about a minute left."

He handed the instrument across the table to Blake.

"Father!" entreated Grace, seizing Blake's arm. "For my sake, you *mustn't*—"

"Grace!" snapped Blake. "I'm plumb ashamed of you. You're acting like a sick schoolgirl. Go to your room. Hello, Jennings! This is Blake—Hello—"

"Hold on, Blake!" ordered Standish. "I'll give you her name. She—"

"Wait!" screamed Grace, beside herself with pain and fear.

"Hello!" Blake was calling wrathfully. "Hello! What in blue blazes is the matter? You've cut us off, central. *'Wire won't work?'* I tell you it's *got* to work!—Hey?—What's that?—*'Out of order?'*—And I haven't sixty seconds to wait! I *must!*—What?—Oh, a lot of good your being sorry does!—Say!—Who am I talking to, anyway?—Miss *Kelly?* Well—I'll be—!"

Blake dropped the receiver on to its hook and set down the instrument with the most profane bang ever heard. "A damn without words," Neligan afterward called it. Jim glanced again at his watch.

"Gentlemen," he announced with dangerous calm, "we're too late. Miss Kelly has seen fit to interfere. They'll have gone to press by now."

"Mr. Standish," cut in Van Dyke's suave voice, "you were about to say—?"

"I've changed my mind," replied Standish, with a covert glance at Grace, who was leaning for support on a corner of the desk. "Good night, gentlemen."

He left the suite. Grace, more dead than alive, made her way blindly across the library to the door leading to her own rooms.

The others stood staring at one another. Downstairs Wanda Kelly smiled beatifically to herself and fluffed out a strand of her hair that had strayed over her forehead.

CHAPTER XIX

PREPARING THE GRILL

IN the dumb disappointment that fell over the group in Mark Robertson's library, the men's eyes gradually turned as by common consent upon Jim Blake. Unruffled, he stood there, master of them all and even master of himself.

"Gentlemen," he drawled at last, "we've got our work cut out for us. We've missed the morning papers. Now, it remains to get our story on the floor of the house to-night. To force adjournment. That will give us time."

"But," objected Van Dyke, pointing to the duplicate telephone list, "we can't get those numbers traced until to-morrow. And we've got to get the name before we dare spread the story in the house. It was different with the newspapers. But—"

"We shall get the Woman's name in the next hour," Blake assured him.

"How?"

"Through the only person left who can tell us what the right number is. The phone girl who interfered with our wire just now. Neligan, go down and tell Perry I want to see Miss Kelly up here at once. Bring her up, yourself. Now, then, Mark," as Neligan departed on his errand, "it's up to you. If the house knows we've got the goods on Standish, fully twenty men like Gregg, here, will weaken and vote for us. And then we can jam the bill through. Get this Woman's name. Find the number we want. You've got the reputation of being the best cross-examiner at the New York bar. Show you deserve that reputation. Take this telephone girl and turn her brains inside out. She knows the number that will lead to the Woman. You've got to get it from her. Don't handle her with gloves or be afraid of making her cry. It's life or death for us to know that number."

"If the number's in her brain," promised Mark readily, "I'll get it out."

He moved to his big study chair, at the far end of the table, turned on the drop-light above his head and seated himself.

"That's right," approved Blake, noting the magisterial pose and setting. "Boys, let Mark do the talking. He can do it. I've heard him make women witnesses tell their real ages. If the insurgents had had him in charge of their investigations they'd have got us all in jail long ago."

There was a knock at the door. Gregg answered it. Neligan entered, all but shoving Wanda Kelly in ahead of him.

"Here she is," he reported.

Leaving her standing there, he turned and ostentatiously closed the door behind him.

The girl looked about at the faces that confronted her on every side. Then she smiled. It was the peaceful smile of the kitten that has just emptied the cream jug. In her throat her heart was hammering to strangulation.

Mark Robertson, from his place at the head of the table, was the first to speak. His voice was quiet, his manner courteous.

"This is Miss Kelly?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the demure Wanda in her most respectful—and unnatural—shop-girl accents.

"Miss Kelly," resumed Mark, "you are the telephone operator, down-stairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were at the switchboard a few minutes ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down, my dear girl!" beamed Blake tenderly, as he indicated the chair that had been placed for her. "We would like to ask you a few questions, if you don't object."

"Yes, sir."

Wanda seated herself on the edge of the chair and looked around her with an expression of awed interest that was worse than irritating. The other men had seated themselves: Gregg, Van Dyke and Neligan near Mark; Jim Blake on the far side of the room.

Midway between Blake and Robertson, Wanda sat—waiting. And, on the other side of the closed door leading from the farther recesses of the suite, Grace listened, breathless.

CHAPTER XX

THE THIRD DEGREE

"MISS KELLY," began Mark, after a full minute of a silence that bit into Wanda's very nerves, "you say you were at the switchboard down-stairs a few moments ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"While I was talking to the Associated Press office?"

"How can I tell, sir?" she asked with smiling helplessness. "You know we're not allowed to listen to conversations over the wire."

"But you connected me when I called up 4400 Main just now?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"H'm! You remember that, do you? Well, that is the number of the Associated Press office. I called up Jennings, the manager. I talked with him

a minute. Then he wanted to speak with Mr. Blake."

"Yes, sir?" asked Wanda, who had been following his recital with the wide-eyed delighted interest of a child listening to a wondrous fairy tale.

"Mr. Blake took the telephone instrument from my hands," pursued Mark, unheeding, "and spoke into it."

Wanda turned slowly and gazed upon Blake in pleased amazement that he could have performed so sensational a feat as Mark had just described. Then she looked back at Mark as though unwilling to miss a single word of such an enthralling narrative.

"But," continued Mark, "when he tried to speak to Jennings he found the connection had suddenly been severed."

"Oh!"

There was a world of sympathetic regret in her exclamation.

"He was told," said Mark slowly, "he was told—by *you,* Miss Kelly—that the line was out of order."

"Oh, yes!" she cried brightly. "And that must

have been why the connection was cut off. What a shame! Just when he wanted to talk, too!"

"Miss Kelly, how long have you been a telephone operator?"

"Nearly five years, sir," simpered Wanda, giving her hearers a fair sample of employment-agency manner.

"Then," said Mark, with a swift change of manner, "you are enough of an expert to know that the line was *not* 'out of order', just now?"

"Wasn't it?" she queried in profound disappointment. "It—it wouldn't work."

"It was working," denied Mark. "It was working when the connection was broken. And broken at *your* desk, Miss Kelly, as your voice showed."

"My voice, sir? Why, I just cut in to find out what the trouble was."

"I see. The line was out of order and you cut in to find out what the trouble was. Very kind. And, of course, you are quite certain the line was out of order?"

"Oh, *quite* certain, sir," she told him with a reassuring smile.

"I suppose," said Mark carelessly, "if the line had got out of order, the manager's office would know of it by this time?"

"Oh, yes."

"Very good," reaching for the instrument. "I'll call up the manager and ask about it."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, momentarily off guard. "It's—it's probably all right again by now."

"Very likely," was Mark's dry assent. "Then you don't want me to call up the manager?"

"Don't bother to do that," she faltered in confusion. "I—I might possibly have knocked out the plug—by accident."

"And you might possibly have done it on purpose," retorted Mark.

"I?" she asked, astounded. "Why should I do such a foolish thing as that?"

"That's what we're going to find out. If it had been an accident, you would have shoved the plug back into place, immediately, when we told you. Isn't that true?"

"I s'pose so," she admitted sulkily.

"Then, Miss Kelly, we are forced to believe that you deliberately refused to transmit our message."

"You can believe anything you want to," she returned spitefully. "I don't care what you believe!"

The line of questioning had thrown her off her carefully prepared line of defense. She had expected merely an attempt—more or less bullying—to gain from her the secret of the number she had promised not to reveal. And, while massing her forces to guard against such an effort, she had been attacked and stormed at a totally undefended quarter. Angry, confused, she tossed aside her useless weapons and was for the instant merely a worried and much-badgered little girl.

"Come to the point," urged Mark, reading her as a printed book. "Will you answer my question or will you not?"

"I don't see why I should," she muttered.

"You will before you're through," dryly promised Blake.

"I'm going!" she declared, getting wrathfully to her feet and making for the door. "I'm not going to stay here to—"

Neligan unobtrusively moved his huge bulk between her and the door, while Blake interposed, without a trace of command in his voice, but as though stating a simple truth:

"You can't leave this room till you've told us what we want to know. And we won't stand for any more freshness or acting. Go ahead, Mark."

"Is it not true," repeated Robertson in measured query, "that you deliberately refused to transmit our message just now?"

"I s'pose so," she vouchsafed. "I butted in. And now I guess I've got to take my medicine."

"And," asked Mark, "do you happen to realize what that medicine is?"

"Oh, I know, all right. I'll lose my job."

"Exactly. And you don't want to lose your job, do you, Miss Kelly?"

"No, I don't. I need the money."

"I see. Quite so. You need the money. Miss Kelly, Mr. Blake has offered you a great deal of money for a certain bit of information, hasn't he?"

"Yes. But—Oh, what's the use? You can get me fired. But I guess I can find another job!"

"It may not be necessary," suggested Mark. "Miss Kelly, we don't want to harm your prospects in any way. We wish merely to show you that it is to your interest to work for us. Mr. Blake has told you how necessary it is for us to gain the information that you alone can give us. He will pay you well. We have asked you to come up here to-night to find out whether you will not accept this offer."

"Well," simpered Wanda, her old alert, resourceful self once more, now that the attack had shifted to the field where her defenses were awaiting it, "I —I need time, you see. Time to think it over—and —and—"

"Time," returned Mark, "is the one thing we can not give you."

"You *can't?*" she asked in sad surprise.

"No, we can't," snarled Blake from his far corner. "And you knew damn well we couldn't when you cut off our wire."

Wanda looked from one to the other in the pained disapproval of a kitten whose paws have been drenched. Then she sighed and leaned back in her chair as though too tired to argue further.

"Well," she inquired in weary patience, "what is it you want me to tell you?"

"We want you," replied Mark, "to tell us a number called up by Mr. Standish early this evening."

He paused for her answer. The others leaned forward. Gregg, with unconscious throwback to early camp-meeting days in Kansas, put one cupped hand behind his ear.

Wanda alone was unconcerned. She was twisting the little bracelet on her wrist and eying it with new and happily absorbed interest from a dozen successive points of view.

"Miss Kelly," demanded Mark, "will you tell us that number or will you not?"

"Why," answered Wanda with a charmingly foolish smile of crass helplessness, "I really don't think I can remember it."

"I think you can," contradicted Mark. "You knew beforehand, from Mr. Blake, how much depended on it. You surely remember."

"That's so," acceded Wanda, seeming to grasp the strength of his argument as by inspiration. "I surely must. But, you see, it's against the rules to

tell. Oh, gentlemen," she cried longingly, "I'd just *love* to help you out. Anything I could do. Anything at all. But we're not allowed to give any information like this. Oh, how I wish—!"

"If you *were* allowed, then," asked Mark, "you'd do it, wouldn't you?"

"That'd be different, of course," she smiled. "But you see how I'm fixed—"

"That's too bad!" mused Mark. "Of course we can't ask you to break the company's rules. But if it were *not* against rules, you'd do it, would you?"

"Oh, in a second! I'd be ever so glad to; but, you see, orders are orders. And—"

"And," chimed in Mark, "luckily we knew how faithful you are to your employers. And, as we anticipated your objections, we took the trouble to remove all such difficulties from your path. Here," taking a paper from a heap on the table, "is an order from your general manager, authorizing you to give us all the help in your power. Does that remove your scruples?"

For an instant she sat genuinely dumfounded. One by one her defenses were being shorn away.

These men, against whom she found herself pitted, had foreseen everything, had allowed for every turn of her agile brain. Their knowledge struck her as almost uncanny. With a great effort she strove to rally her pitiful little forces to meet the new onslaught.

"May I see that order, sir?" she asked timidly.

"Certainly," said Mark, handing the paper across to her.

Slowly, as she looked, a frown of painful perplexity creased her forehead. She seemed to find the briefly-phrased typewritten words as hard to read as a cryptogram. Then, with a little impatient laugh at her own stupidity, she seemed to perceive for the first time that she was holding the page upside down. Deliberately righting it, she began all over again her task of reading it. With snail-like slowness and with moving lips she deciphered each word. Then she read it all over and again a third time.

"Yes," she said at last, returning the sheet to the fuming cross-examiner, "it really seems to be all right."

"Now, Miss Kelly," pressed Mark, "are you pre-

pared to take the responsibility of disobeying your manager's commands? Or will you tell us what we ask?"

"But," babbled Wanda, in a peculiarly annoying and whining tone of irresolution, "d'you think it'd be square for me to tell? *Ought* I to give away a customer's secrets? Now, honest, Governor Robertson, don't you think it'd be kind of mean of me? Don't you?"

"Hell!" exploded Jim Blake. "The girl's kidding you, Mark!"

"Please!" sternly interposed Mark, raising his hand to silence Blake's impending torrent of abuse.

His father-in-law sank back, muttering. And Robertson, turning back to Wanda, resumed in his most conciliatory manner:

"Come, Miss Kelly! Don't force us to use harsh measures. You help us—and we will help you. And if—"

"Oh, Governor Robertson," gushed Wanda, "that's ever and ever so kind of you! You don't know how a poor discouraged working girl appreciates such—"

"Miss Kelly!" rapped Mark, "I advise you to be careful! You say your position is of value to you—"

"Of course, sir. But I can't bear to hurt your feelings by refusing anything you gentlemen ask."

Another start from Blake was checked by a quick glance from his son-in-law. Then Robertson continued:

"I asked you a few minutes ago if you were prepared to assume full responsibility for disobeying your manager's order? Are—?"

"First," she exclaimed remorsefully, "I want to tell you all how awfully sorry I am that I interfered with your telephone talk a while ago. I don't know what made me do such an—an—impolite thing. Really, I don't. Sometimes, you know, I act so strange that I'm almost frightened at myself. I wish—"

"We will take that up presently, Miss Kelly. Unless you want to make everything all right now, by helping us. Will you tell us that number?"

"Oh, sir, it doesn't seem quite fair for me to do a thing like that. At least it doesn't seem so to *me*.

But, of course, you know more about right and wrong than a poor—"

"Come to the point, please!" reiterated Mark. "Will you tell us or won't you?"

"Oh, then," she broke down weakly, "I s'pose I'd better tell you."

Her surrender snapped the tension. Blake nodded grim approval. The other listeners relaxed. Even Robertson's hard mouth softened in exultation.

"That's right!" applauded Mark. "You won't be sorry for it."

"But understand one thing," stipulated Wanda with shrill insistence: "I won't take any money for telling you. Not one cent."

"We can arrange that later," broke in Blake. "Go ahead."

She looked at him in open-eyed interest. And when he ceased to speak she still gazed as if hungry to hear more.

"Well," asked Mark, "what was the number?"

"The number?" echoed Wanda absently.

Her face grew thoughtful, then puzzled. Her eyes rolled about the room as if seeking something

that eluded her brain. She clasped her hand to her brow in a strikingly dramatic struggle for memory. Then she murmured apologetically, sweeping the circle with an air of plaintive regret:

"Now, that's queer! Would you believe it, I had that number on the very tip of my tongue! Not three minutes ago! And all those questions of yours have driven it clean out of my head. Let me see, now! What *was* the number?"

Another quite frightful spasm of unsuccessful search in the recesses of a mazed brain. Then she shook her head and looked at Robertson in despair.

"Was it a district number?" queried Mark, his face giving no sign of anything but desire to refresh her memory.

"Oh, yes!" cried Wanda, her eyes brightening. "A district number. Yes. I remember that it was a district number."

"What exchange?"

A further futile ransacking of the mind.

"Was it Main?"

She shook her head.

"Cleveland?"

"N-no."

"Takoma?"

"Yes! Yes! It's all come back to me now, sir. It was Takoma. That was it. Takoma. 678 Takoma!"

"678 Takoma," repeated Mark, while Van Dyke ran a searching finger down the list he held. "You are quite sure, Miss Kelly, that it was 678 Takoma?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" Wanda assured him in eager triumph. "678 Takoma. I remember—"

"It wasn't 876 Takoma?"

"Oh, no, sir. 678."

Mark glanced at Van Dyke, who shook his head. The cross-examiner's tone grew all at once as cold as death.

"You have been playing with us long enough, Miss Kelly," said he. "I let it go on until I was certain you meant to lead us on a wild-goose chase. Now, if you please, we'll get down to business!"

"Why?" asked Wanda in marveling innocence. "Wasn't that number the right one, after all?"

"No. And you knew it was not. No such number was called from this hotel."

"Oh! Then you got the duplicate slips from central? Perhaps, if you'd let me look over them, I could—"

"Could send us on the wrong track? I have no doubt you could. No, thank you. You see, we can investigate these numbers without you. It's merely a question of investigating each of them and—"

"Then," demanded Wanda, "why did you bother to ask *me?*"

"To save time."

"Oh! And we've been saving time, have we, sir?"

"No," he returned with ominous calm, "we haven't. But we've found out exactly where *you* stand in the matter, Miss Kelly. We—"

"Then," flashed Wanda, shaking her manifold affectations from her like a garment, "then you know I won't tell. And if I don't, you know you can't find out. You haven't time. You said so yourself. You've only got a few hours at most. And before you can strike another trail the Woman will be on her guard!"

"You state the case very clearly, Miss Kelly,"

agreed Mark, unruffled. "You have evidently given the matter some thought. By preventing us from using the morning papers, you force us to get our information for the house, to-night. What is your motive in all this? Isn't our price high enough?"

"That's not it."

"Do you think, perhaps, that you can go to the Woman and get a bigger price?"

"A swell chance I'd stand!" sneered Wanda. "Don't you suppose I know the minute I leave this room I'll be shadowed?"

Mark glowered at her in silence. Then he picked up the list that Van Dyke had just laid down.

"Many of these numbers," he said, half to himself, "can be eliminated at once. For instance, here's my own call to New York—1001 Plaza—"

"They've charged you for *two* calls, Mark," commented Van Dyke, glancing at the list over Robertson's shoulder. "See? Plaza 1001—twice. One directly under the other."

"Yes," said Mark, "they must have repeated it in copying the list. That makes two less for us to look

up. We'll trace the number we want, sooner or later. Why won't you be sensible, Miss Kelly, and talk terms?"

"Because I don't like the work. It looks too rank for any one but a statesman. I'm not to be bought for that kind of—"

"I see," said Mark reflectively. "Now let us get back to the other matter: to your interference with our wire."

He hesitated, leaned across to Van Dyke and whispered. Van Dyke nodded, rose and crossed to a case tiered ceiling-high with law books.

"You spoke just now, Miss Kelly," continued Robertson, "of taking your medicine. And I asked you if you knew what sort of medicine it might be."

"Don't rub it in," she snapped. "I'm going to lose my job. Let it go at that. A bunch of the nation's representative men have combined, in an all-night session, to throw a telephone operator out of work. And they've succeeded. We'll take that for granted. I'll leave you to do your celebrating of the mighty victory without me. I'm going. I congratulate you all. You've lost the Mullins bill fight. But, instead,

you've won in your great fight to make me lose my job. That ought to help some. And it proves that even if you can't lick a man like Standish you're still live wires."

"One moment, Miss Kelly," intervened Mark, opening the calfskin volume Van Dyke had just brought him from the book-shelves. "You spoke of losing your job. I'm afraid that isn't all you'll lose."

"No," she agreed, "I'll lose the blood money I could have raked in if I'd sold you the Woman's name."

"And your liberty."

"My—my—*what?*"

"Your liberty, Miss Kelly," repeated Mark, eying the startled girl with stormy unconcern.

She whitened ever so little and into her big eyes came a quick shadow like that in the eyes of a cornered and outmaneuvered wild thing. But she threw off the grip of fear and laughed impudently into her inquisitor's stolid face.

"Say!" she grated. "D'you think I'm going to fall for a bluff like that? I'm not Looloo-From-the-

Tall-Timber. And I don't screech every time I see a cop. Lose my 'liberty', hey?"

"Yes, Miss Kelly," said Mark gravely, "your liberty."

And again his words, coupled with his quiet assurance of being in the right, fanned to life that dull fear in her heart.

"You mighty finance jugglers live so long on the razor edge of jail," she scoffed with a bravado that somehow would not ring true, "that you ought to be experts on all the stunts people can be locked up for. But this time the bluff's too thin. You can't put me into prison just for knocking out a phone plug, and you know it."

Robertson did not answer at once. Indeed, he did not seem to hear. He was turning the pages of the law book before him. Presently he found what he wanted.

"Miss Kelly," he said, "as a telephone operator, you must have had your attention called to Section 641 of the Penal Code. Have you not?"

"Yes," she returned defiantly, "I have."

"Then," resumed Mark in the manner of a magistrate of the old school, "you must realize that by refusing, as an operator, to transmit our message over the telephone, you broke the law."

"But I—"

"You have admitted in the presence of witnesses that you interfered in the transmission of our message. You are aware, by the terms of Section 641, you have thus rendered yourself liable to—" he read from the volume, "a fine of one thousand dollars or one year's imprisonment or both!"

"And *your* judge," she flared, her back to the wall at last and the light of hopeless but unflinching battle in her dark eyes, "your judge will see that I get *both!* Is that what you're driving at? I'm to get a year in jail and a thousand dollars fine just for—?"

"It is quite possible," dryly assented Robertson. "So you see, Miss Kelly, you are in rather an awkward fix."

"And," panted Wanda, "you'll do that to a phone girl, just because she tries to be decent?"

"We don't want to," politely evaded Robertson.

CHAPTER XXI

REPRESENTED BY COUNSEL

THE outer door opened with Jack-in-the-box suddenness and Tom Blake was in the cleared space where Wanda stood at bay.

"What's the matter?" he demanded of her eagerly. "The clerk just told me they'd sent for you to come up here. I was afraid it was about that wretched number. So I came—"

"You're a mind-reader," she sneered, nevertheless looking up at him with a gratitude very like adoration. "They've lost the chance to harm one woman. They're taking out the grudge on another."

"So it *was* about the number?"

"It was. But it isn't. It's about my going to jail."

"What!"

"For breaking the connection a while ago when they were sending orders over the wire about the Standish story. They've flashed Section 641 on me. Jail or fine. I'm to get both!"

"You'll get neither," roared Tom. "You're a fine line of men, all of you, to bully and browbeat one poor kid of a girl. Well, you've done all of it you're going to. *I'm* here now. And I'll—"

"Oh, Tom," grunted Jim Blake in tired disgust, "you're worse than a collie pup with fleas. Can't you take your mouth out for a walk, and stop mixing up with grown folks' business? Keep out of this."

"I won't. I've kept out of it too long. I won't stand for the way you—"

"Won't, hey?" drawled Blake. "Then what will sonny do?"

"I'll act as her counsel, for one thing. She's got a right to legal advice. It's the law. And—"

"Hell's full of law," commented Blake. "What's the law to us?"

"It's this much to you," answered Tom. "If you dare carry out your bullying threats against Miss Kelly, I'll raise a stir in the courts and the papers that'll put you and the machine out of business."

"Try it, my boy," advised his father, as though admonishing an unruly kindergarten child. "Try it. She's broken the law. The case will be tried before

one of my own judges. I guess you can figure out the answer. You know as well as I do what will happen if I'm on one side and this Kelly person is on the other. She'll stand about as much chance as an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* show in Alabama in 1863."

"Miss Kelly," formally asked Tom, "may I act as your counsel?"

"You bet you can!" was the girl's fervid response.

"Very good," nodded Tom. "Then, gentlemen, this investigation will be conducted not only on strictly legal lines, but with due courtesy; or my client will leave."

"Leave?" grinned Blake. "Not yet, she won't."

"We will bring suit, then for illegal—"

"Bring it," retorted Blake, "and see what'll drop on you. I'm Jim Blake. Every cop in Washington salutes as I go by. My auto can sew buttons on the speed ordinances and no one dare kick. Why, I could kill a man in broad daylight; and the coroner would say 'self-defense'. I wouldn't even come to trial for it. That's *my* power. And you know it. That's the power you threaten to 'put out of business'? No, no, sonny. What you say sounds fine. But it doesn't

make sense. This girl's broken the law. And the court undoubtedly will give her whatever term I say. She—"

At this point in his drawling exposition Blake caught Mark Robertson's eye. And at a signal he read there, the older man brought his jaws together with a click, leaned back in his big chair and became once more a spectator.

"Since you insist on interfering, Tom," said Robertson, "I consent to recognize you as counsel for Miss Kelly. You are a lawyer and you know we can do what your father has said we can. We can legally send Miss Kelly to prison as an operator who has violated the law. And, by the way, it will be a decidedly good example to other phone girls who talk too much and listen too much and who seem to regard the secrecy clause in the telephone company's list of orders as a dead letter. Miss Kelly has committed a penal offense. She has admitted her guilt in the presence of witnesses—"

"Lord! Why didn't I get here sooner?"

"I have, technically, a perfect case. Now, as her counsel, do you want this matter settled privately,

here and now? Or do you prefer a formal charge and a public trial?"

"You can't force the situation like this," cried Tom. "It's conspiracy!"

"Is it?" retorted Mark coolly. "Very good. Since you choose to take that tone, we will simply call your bluff by arresting her. Neligan, go and get a plain-clothes man. Tell the captain it's for Jim Blake. Bring the man back with you and have him within call."

"We're kind of up against it, aren't we, Tom?" whispered Wanda as Neligan departed on his mission.

"They'll do it," returned Tom in the same tone. "That's the worst part of it. I can smash one or two of them, before they lay hands on you, girl. And I shall. You can count on seeing the prettiest bit of rough house ever pulled off in Washington. If you go to jail, some one's going to the hospital, first. But that won't save you. They've got the law with them. Why won't you tell, Wanda? This Woman's nothing to you. Why not save yourself by telling her number?"

"Because," exclaimed Wanda stubbornly, "there's nothing to tell. I just *won't* help them."

"But you're risking your liberty."

"I'm keeping my self-respect."

"Miss Kelly," said Mark, overhearing, as she unconsciously raised her voice in the heat of dispute, "these heroics are all very fine. But prison is not a pleasant place. And your counsel knows we can put you there."

"Oh, I grant that," retorted Tom. "You've got everything. The police, the courts, the law—everything. But you haven't got her in prison yet, and you won't until you have a chance, first, to send me there, too, on a charge of assault with intent to kill. If you think *that's* a bluff, go ahead and call it. You are the men our country refers to as its 'Shining Lights'! 'Shining Lights?' You're only 'Danger' signals!"

"And," pursued Mark, paying absolutely no attention to the younger man's ravings, "when you have served your prison term, Miss Kelly, I warn you that you will find every door to an honest living closed against you."

"She won't need to make a living," vociferated Tom. "If she'll let me, I'm going to—"

"Miss Kelly," said Robertson, eying the girl sharply, "I have conducted many cases, but I confess this puzzles me. There is something in it I can not understand. We offer you the alternative of prison —Mr. Blake has offered you money. And still you refuse us. You are not the sort of girl to lose so much for an abstract principle. No one but a fool or a heroine would do it. And you're neither. There's some strong personal motive that makes you oppose us. Is—?"

"Oh, I've got motive enough in opposing the machine, if it comes to that!" interrupted Wanda. "In the first place, my father was Frank E. Kelly."

Mark's face stiffened with surprise. Gregg and Van Dyke glanced at each other, half-awed. Jim Blake alone gave no sign of disturbance. Glancing amusedly at Wanda from between his slitted eyes, he drawled:

"Frank E. Kelly, hey? So you're trying to get back at me, young woman?"

"Put it that way if you like," returned Wanda

fiercely. "But there is more than that. I'm against you and all the dirty machine in every way. Why? Because I've got the bad luck to be one of the people. To be one of the public that you bleed and guy. I'm a strap-hanger who pays five cents for a seat and doesn't get it. I'm—"

"We are not here to discuss socialism," interposed Mark. "We—"

"Socialism!" she mocked. "That's the fancy word for anything that calls graft and rottenness by their right names. The day's passing when you can shut people's mouths by howling socialism at them. I don't know what socialism is—and I don't care. But I do know—"

The telephone jangled into the rush of her talk. Jim Blake picked up the instrument.

"Hello," he queried, "that you, Burns? Instructions, hey? I gave 'em. Keep Winthrop talking till he drops, then get Mullins recognized and let him talk all night if he can; or till I'm ready to break in. Delay—that's the idea—*delay!* Hold the floor and delay. What? Oh, in a little while, now, I guess. Don't worry."

"Are things getting warm on the bill?" asked Gregg as Blake hung up the receiver.

"Only so-so. It's all right. Only don't waste any more time, Mark. Hit up the pace. Never mind if the boiler explodes."

"Miss Kelly," said Mark, "you still refuse to answer my questions?"

"I refuse everything," exulted Wanda. "You and the machine are licked to a standstill. And *I* helped to do it. That's easy worth a good whole year in jail."

"Your motives for working against us?" he insisted. "You say you are doing it on account of your father and because of your political beliefs?"

"Yes."

"There is no more personal motive?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you shielding any one?"

"Of course I am. I'm shielding the Woman you're after."

"Do you know who she is?"

"No."

"Gregg," ordered Robertson, turning to the

highly-entertained Kansan, "will you go and get Standish? Ask him to come here."

"What in green-and-yellow Hades do you want Standish for?" snorted Blake.

"And," supplemented Gregg, loath to miss the rest of so diverting a scene of torture, "maybe I couldn't find him. Or, if I could, how do you know he'd come here. We weren't what you'd call real friendly with him when he was here, a while back."

"You'll find Hicks down-stairs," replied Mark. "He and his men had orders to keep Standish in sight. They'll tell you where he is if he isn't in the house. As for making him come here, tell him he may save this girl from prison. Then if she's in his pay or if she is a friend of the Woman he'll come."

"All right," ruefully assented Gregg, making sadly for the outer door.

"And say, Gregg," Blake called after the departing recreation loser, "after you've sent Standish here, go and report to Burns. He may have need for your prairie lungs when Mullins and Winthrop get hoarse."

The gate of a trouble-lover's paradise slamming behind him, the Kansan departed—a slave to machine duty.

"Miss Kelly," Mark had already resumed, "you say you don't know who this Woman is. Yet you admit you are facing prison in order to protect her."

"No," returned Wanda easily, "I told you I'm doing this to get back at you for my father's—"

"A revenge that will cost you your liberty."

"Folks can't get something for nothing—except you grafters."

"Don't try to stick it out, girl," exhorted Blake. "You can't afford to get square with me at this price."

"Can't I? Wait and see."

"Do you know Standish, personally?" called Mark.

"No, I don't."

"You want him to win, then, just for political reasons.

"That's it."

"If any other man than Standish were fighting the organization, you would act as you are now?"

"Yes," said Wanda, thankful to feel her feet planted once more on solid ground, and breathing the more easily for the safer turn the questions were taking.

"And," continued Mark, "if any other woman were in danger you would still oppose us in this way?"

"Yes."

"Then," cried Mark in quick triumph, "you *do* know who she is!"

"I—no—I didn't say so!" murmured Wanda, wholly at a loss.

"You didn't *mean* to say so," corrected Mark; "but you admitted it."

"I didn't! I didn't!" confusedly reiterated Wanda.

The long strain was telling on her. Her wits, usually so agile, now moved with palpable effort. The quick brain felt like hot lead. She was oppressed by a curious sense of physical nausea. Dimly she began to realize how a victim of the third degree may at last break down through sheer fatigue. Yet she rallied her fagged-out forces, wearily repeating:

"I didn't."

"Don't fence with us. I say you know who the Woman is—this Woman for whom you are so eager to sacrifice yourself. No one suffers as you are suffering merely for political principle. You not only know this Woman but you care enough for her to suffer in her place."

His words, no longer inquisitorial, but beating down with merciless victory upon her shattered defenses, drove Wanda to her last refuge—dull obstinacy.

"If I did know," she muttered sullenly, "it wouldn't do *you* any good. If I knew her name you'd never get it out of me. I don't care what you do, I'll never—I—I won't tell! *I won't tell! I WON'T TELL!*"

Her voice, hysterics-torn, rose harsh and shrill as the cry of a peacock.

"Wanda!" soothed Tom. "Don't, dear! Keep cool. It's a vile outrage! Mark, if you—"

"Of course you understand, Miss Kelly," went on Mark, as gently now as if he were talking to a child, "that the actual name is worth much more to

us than the clue the number would give. We will pay you a thousand dollars—"

"No! I tell you I won't! No!"

"We'll throw the limit into the waste basket," drawled Blake. "I'll make it ten thousand. Ten thousand dollars, Miss Kelly. I could buy a whole pailful of congressman for less. But it's yours, for that name."

"I won't tell!" panted Wanda, forcing each word with pain from between convulsively clenched teeth. "I—won't—tell!"

"Oh, come! Come!" coaxed Mark. "There's a price for everything. We understand your feelings of loyalty to this Woman. You don't want to give her away. She's a dear friend of yours who—who made one mistake and then repented. Is that it?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Wanda, striving to choke down her growing horror for this smooth-voiced plump man who was so inexorably wearing her nerves to shreds. "Yes, that's it. She's a good woman, now. She's married. Happy, too. You'll make her life

a hell, just to win your fight. Don't you see I can't do what you want?"

"That's why we're trying to make it easy for you. We don't want to prosecute you—"

"It isn't prosecution!" shouted Tom. "It's *per*-secution! Dirty low-down persecution of a kid who's being square. You're a fine body of men to bend all your weight and strength and skill to breaking a butterfly. You're trying to make her betray a sacred trust. And in doing it you're betraying the womanhood of the mothers that bore you. Lord! I've seen forty-two pictures of Judas Iscariot; and no two of them looked alike. But every one of them looked like *you* curs!"

"I've never yet seen a picture of the Original Damn Fool," sighed Blake, in contemptuous boredom; "but I wish you'd have one taken, Tom."

"Miss Kelly," urged Mark, "your name won't appear in this. No one need know it was you who put us on the track."

"I—won't—tell!"

"Then," Mark exclaimed roughly, "we can do nothing more. Van Dyke, telephone down and see

if—Oh, here you are, Neligan! Got that plain-clothes man down-stairs?"

Neligan nodded. Meanwhile Tom was whispering frenziedly to Wanda.

"Tell me the name, dear. I won't tell the others. But it may show me a way to help you out. And we're in a horrible fix."

"I know that—But—*I won't tell!*"

"But if you won't even tell me why you refuse—"

"If I told you, you couldn't help. You'd agree I'm doing right."

Tom whirled about on the others.

"Dad! Mark!" he said. "Before you go any further I want you to know I've asked Miss Kelly to be my wife."

"No, no!" cried Wanda, trying to throw her open hand across his mouth. "Don't—"

"If she consents," rushed on Tom, "I'll marry her at once; whether in prison or out. I love her. For my sake won't you—?"

"I'm very sorry, Tom," replied Mark, "but she's not your wife, yet. And she has her release in her own hands. She has only to speak—"

"Dad!" appealed the boy.

"Not on your worthless life," growled Blake. "That's the very thing she's been working up to all the time. I knew it and I've been waiting for this. Her price is my consent. And I won't pay it. That's what I meant when I said the price was too high. She wouldn't be the first girl—or the millionth—who's roped in a rich man's easy son and held the father up and ruined the boy's future. Not for mine, thanks. I stand pat."

"If you've any influence with her, Tom," remarked his brother-in-law, "you'll use it to make her tell."

"He hasn't any influence!" retorted Wanda before Tom could speak. "Except that his standing by me against you all proves to me I'm doing right. And—do you think, Jim Blake, that I'd marry a son of yours? Not if he was John D. Rockefeller and E. H. Sothern rolled into one. Not till I've squared my account with you."

"You won't marry a son of Jim Blake's?" echoed Tom. "Well, after to-night I'm not Jim Blake's son. Here's where I cut loose and—"

"Go as far as you like," vouchsafed his father, outwardly unmoved. "But the girl tells us or else she goes to jail."

"I—won't—tell!"

"Mark, ring for the officer—"

"There he is at the door," answered Robertson as the buzzer sounded. "Let him in, Neligan."

"I—won't—tell!"

Neligan opened the door. Standish stood on the threshold. Tom, who had leaned forward pugnaciously, drew back.

"Come in, Mr. Standish," said Mark. "I suppose Gregg explained the situation to you."

"That is why I am here," curtly answered Standish; his somber eyes traveling slowly about the room and resting at last on Wanda's tense, haggard little face.

"You know, then," went on Mark, "that she is ready to face imprisonment to shield you?"

"That is what Mr. Gregg told me. I don't understand—"

"Neither do we. But we thought you might feel like saving her from punishment."

"How?"

"By voting with us on the Mullins bill."

"No."

"You will accept her sacrifice, then?"

"I—I have no alternative."

"I'm sorry," said Mark with a shrug of his wide shoulders, "but that seems to settle it, all around. Neligan, tell them to send the plain-clothes man here. We may as well wind this up at once."

"Wait, please," interposed Standish.

He crossed to where Wanda stood.

"Miss Kelly," he said gently, "why are you doing this?"

"I promised her," said the girl.

"I don't see why you should have promised—"

"No," replied Wanda, with a slight curl of her lip. "You wouldn't see."

"Standish," observed Mark, "you speak as if you were willing we should know the Woman's name."

"Not at all. I'm only sorry the machine has closed its teeth on that poor little girl."

"Thanks!" jeered Wanda. "Now, then, Mr. Blake, call your cop. I'm ready."

Blake nodded to Mark, who picked up the telephone instrument.

Then, before any of them knew of her presence, Grace was in the room and had caught her husband's arm as he lifted the receiver from the hook.

"You shan't do it!" she was crying. "You shall *not!*"

CHAPTER XXII

THE LAST CARD

WANDA was first to see her, even before Mark felt the restraining clasp on his arm.

"Mrs. Robertson!" cried the telephone girl in terror; intuition telling her why Grace was there.

"Grace!" called Tom joyously. "Help us! You'll make everything right. You always do."

Mark Robertson's quick exclamation of annoyance and Jim Blake's disgusted growl blended into one chord of protest.

"Father," said Grace in eager appeal, "you won't go on with this? It is abominable!"

"I'm sorry, daughter; but we've got to. I wish you'd clear out. It's no place—"

"But, father, can't you see? Miss Kelly is protecting some poor woman who has done wrong and who has repented. Must she be punished so? Must the Woman's years of repentance all count for nothing?"

"That's no concern of ours," said Mark. "The Woman's possible repentance is between her and her God. We—"

"Then leave her punishment to God. It's not for you to say how she shall suffer. How can a mortal like yourself tell where her punishment lies? You are striking with the blindness of a man; without dreaming where the blow will fall."

"It will fall where it is deserved. I'm enough of a believer in divine justice to know that."

"It will fall on her husband more heavily than on her."

"It will do him no harm to know the type of woman he's married. If she was worth saving she told him everything before she became his wife. If she didn't, she doesn't merit any one's pity."

"It isn't fair! It isn't *fair!* Mark, your injustice to this girl here is a thousandfold worse than your cruelty to the Woman. It is wicked to punish Wanda Kelly for her loyalty in trying to save a friend from disgrace. It's cowardly—unbelievable!"

"Steady, daughter! Steady!" admonished Blake, amazed at his usually well-poised child's vehemence.

"You're all worked up over this. It isn't like you to—"

"No," agreed Mark, "it isn't. That is what has been puzzling me."

He was eying Grace strangely. The lightning quick and accurate faculty of deduction that had won his first success at the bar was stirring strongly within him.

"Grace," he went on, as though feeling his way through tortuous thought-passages by means of a frail clue, "you've never before interfered with our affairs. You have heard of just as unfortunate cases as this; and yet you always seemed to take it for granted we were doing right. Have you any personal reason for defending this Woman against your own husband and your father? Do you know who she is?"

"That's absurd!" denied Grace with an effort at derisive laughter that rang as false as a cracked coin. "How could I possibly—?"

"This Kelly girl knows," insisted Mark. "And she has told you. She has enlisted your aid. Isn't that so?"

"Nonsense! Would Miss Kelly be likely to come to me—a stranger—and—?"

"Grace, when I came back from the Capitol a while ago that door was locked. And I heard a woman's voice. I thought then it was from the next suite. But now I know better. This girl here was with you, then; appealing to you, winning your sympathy for her friend. That's why you were all unstrung and nervous when I came in. That's why you talked to me so wildly about mercy and the power of a woman to live down her past. You've known all along. You saw the straits we were laboring in. At a word you could have put victory into our hands."

"I—no—I—"

"Grace," he commanded, his voice still gentle, but with a ring of iron behind its suavity, "look at me!"

Slowly, as by hard physical effort, she raised her panic-widened eyes to meet his gaze.

"You know this Woman's name," he declared.

At the mastery that vibrated through his voice and look, she faltered, through no conscious volition of her own:

"Yes."

There was a general movement. Neligan slapped his great hand on his knee. Wanda took an impulsive step toward Grace.

"You know the name," pursued Mark, still gripping his wife's brain by the magnetism that was almost hypnotic power. "We still have time to use it. Tell it to me."

"No—no!" she murmured distractedly. "I—I can't. I won't. I—"

"Grace!" and now the iron glinted more openly through the velvet sheathing, "do you mean to say you are going to let us face ruin when one word from you would—"

"I tell you, I can't—I *can't!*"

Mark shifted his attack with unexpected swiftness.

"Mr. Standish is willing," said he, "to see this girl here terribly punished for protecting the guilty Woman. Are *you?*"

"No, no! But—"

"Mrs. Robertson!" broke in Wanda, first of all to detect the note of weakening in Grace's voice.

"Don't tell! *Don't tell!* Keep your nerve. It's all right. Never you mind what they threaten to do to *me.* Don't give her away!"

"Shut up!" roared Neligan.

Grace had already turned to the girl, her eyes swimming, her lips a-tremble.

"I can't let you pay such a price as that, Miss Kelly," she expostulated. "I can't! I can't do that!"

"Why not," stoutly demanded Wanda, "if I am willing?"

"Oh—what *can* I do?"

"You can do your duty to your husband and father," suggested Robertson. "Well," he added coldly, as his wife looked at him in dull despair, "I'm waiting for your answer."

"She'll keep her word to *me!*" cried Wanda, forestalling Grace's half-formed reply. "She promised me not to tell. And she won't. Come on, you cheap blackmailers and take me to jail if you're going to. I'm—"

Mark's eyes had never for an instant left his wife's face. At the horror that now deepened in it he saw what his next and crowning move must be.

"Neligan," he ordered, "take this phone girl down-stairs and turn her over to the officer who is waiting. Van Dyke will be around at the station-house in a few minutes to make the charge. And he'll see that she is held in bail too heavy for her friends to pay."

"Neligan!" yelled Tom, springing in front of the giant henchman as the latter moved toward Wanda. "If you put a finger on her I'll—"

"No!" wailed Grace in the same breath. "You shan't arrest her, Mark. I can't bear it! I—"

"You'll tell?" asked Mark, exultant at the success of his ruse.

"I—*yes!*"

"No!" contradicted Wanda.

But this time Grace did not respond to the eager appeal. And Mark knew that he had won.

"Mrs. Robertson!" implored Wanda. "Remember what you promised me! Don't lose your nerve, I tell you. Come on, Mr. Hired Man and turn me over to the police. Tom, stand out of his way. It's all right."

"Stop!" broke in Grace. "I *must* tell. I must!"

"Pardon me, Robertson," intervened Standish, as he saw Grace's last barrier break down; "but I advise you to clear the room before you let her speak. Three people here already know the name. I advise you to keep the number as small as possible."

"That is our affair, not yours," retorted Mark. "She shall tell us all. Inside of a few hours the whole country is going to know that name."

"Mark," begged Grace, "let me tell it to you alone!"

"No," refused the husband. "It's too late now to spare any one's feelings. And witnesses are necessary in an affair like this. It concerns us all. And we must move quickly."

"Mrs. Robertson!" reiterated Wanda, "you promised—"

"Grace," interrupted Mark, fearful lest the girl's frenzied plea should make his wife waver, "you had no right to give a promise that put you against me and against your father. It is far worse to keep such a promise than to break it. What is the name?"

"Grace," pleaded Blake, as she still fought vainly

for words, "you've got the whole party in your hands to-night; Mark's future, my own power—"

"Grace," ordered Mark; "tell us! Every minute is precious now."

"You've *got* to tell us," added Blake. "What are you afraid of, girl? I'm behind you. Neligan," as she still hesitated and glanced hopelessly at Wanda, "take this phone girl away."

"No!" cried Grace, finding her tongue at last. "I'll tell. I promise. I'll *tell!* Don't touch her."

"Good!" ejaculated Mark, understanding that the victory was utterly his, past all further doubt.

"Mr. Standish," he went on with a savage joy that rent away the last remnant of the velvet from the iron beneath. "It's been a long fight. But you couldn't beat the organization. And I told you you couldn't. I warned you not to meddle with our affairs. You have worried us at every turn. Now you'll pay for it. And you'll get the same mercy you offered us. Even if you offer to resign we won't give you that alternative. You've been howling for a fight to a finish. This is the finish."

"It *is* the finish," agreed Standish, his deep voice infinitely sad. "And I am sorry for it. I don't think you need me here any longer, gentlemen. And I will barely have time to reach the Capitol before the bill comes to a vote. Good night."

He looked furtively at Grace. But she was staring blankly ahead of her with eyes that saw nothing.

"Good night," he repeated. "I would have spared you, Robertson. But you *would* have it."

And he was gone. His words had fallen on deaf ears. The men were leaning forward eagerly to catch Grace's first syllable.

"And now," Mark demanded, as his wife still hesitated, "who is she, Grace?"

Blake had forestalled her answer. He crossed the room to the telephone.

"We win!" he was chuckling. "It's a way we've got. Hell's full of losers. And I'm still loss-proof."

"What are you going to do?" queried Van Dyke, who had dropped back in his chair a few moments earlier, taking no longer even a passive part in the scene.

"I'm going to phone Gregg to let the house know the whole story; names, dates and all. By the time I get him on the wire Grace will have told."

"Hold on, Jim," objected Van Dyke. "Not yet."

"Not yet? What d'ye mean? Why not? We're almost against the ropes over there at the Capitol. This is our last punch and it's going to be a knock-out."

"Wait, Jim!" begged Van Dyke. "Wait till you hear the name."

"We've got the name. Grace is going to tell us."

"You've got it, yes. But you can't use it, Jim."

Blake, telephone instrument in hand, paused to glare down in angry amazement at the saturnine lawyer who so calmly opposed him in the hour of victory.

"Why in blazes can't we use it?" he blustered. "Are you weakening?"

He took the receiver from the hook. But Van Dyke, with a peremptory gesture, halted him.

"Wait, I say!" ordered the lawyer. "Neligan, go down-stairs and get rid of that officer. And don't come back."

Blake and Robertson blinked in wonder at the man who had so suddenly and inexplicably assumed mastership of the situation. Neligan, doubtfully, yet obeying the note of imperative command in Van Dyke's voice, moved toward the door.

"Go with him, Tom," whispered Wanda. "For my sake. *You* don't want to hear the name."

"You're right," assented Tom, following in Neligan's wake. "It's none of my business. Now that you are safe—"

The door closed behind the two departing men.

"Come, Grace," prompted Mark. "Who is she?"

Grace's lips parted. But they were dry and cracked. Her tongue would not stir.

CHAPTER XXIII

JIM BLAKE, LOSER

AND so for an instant they stood. It was an odd tableau: Grace, helpless, shaking, dumb; Wanda, her arms clasped protectingly about the unheeding Woman, who did not so much as realize their presence nor feel the warm sympathy of their embrace; Mark, his triumph tinged with impatience at his wife's hesitation; Blake, still gripping the telephone and glowering in angry surprise at the lawyer; Van Dyke grim, alert, master of the moment, his lean face set in lines of unwonted sadness.

And it was Van Dyke who broke the brief silence. His precise dry voice was tinged by a note of something almost solemn as he addressed Robertson.

"Mark," he said, "Miss Kelly has told us that she promised the—the Woman not to tell. When did she make that promise?"

"What does that matter now?" snapped Mark. "We—"

"She never heard of the affair until early this evening. So it must be since then that she talked with the Woman about it. Miss Kelly has been on duty down-stairs ever since six o'clock. She has not left this hotel. How could she have communicated with the Woman?"

"By telephone. If—"

"I think not," denied Van Dyke, the cold sorrow in his voice now apparent to every one. "The Woman is here in this house."

"So much the better!" declared Blake, again picking up the telephone.

Van Dyke, in gloomy wonder, turned on his chief.

"You have often boasted, Jim," said he, "that you owe your success to the fact you see things just a second sooner than other people. Don't *you* understand—even yet?"

"No," growled Blake, "I don't. Out with it, man! What are you trying to get at? Don't beat about the bush. You're wasting time that we haven't got."

Van Dyke faced Robertson; his lean face working.

"Mark," he said, tapping the duplicate telephone list, "your house in New York is charged here with two calls. We thought it was a mistake—"

A wordless gurgle from Jim Blake interrupted him. The telephone was set down by a hand that shook as though from palsy. For a single instant the heavy-lidded eyes were wholly, starkly unveiled in a glare of unbelieving horror. Then they turned stupidly upon Grace who bowed her head in a spasm of hysterical unchecked weeping before the panic query in their gaze.

Wanda Kelly wound her arms tighter about the heaving body. But Grace neither felt the contact nor heard the whisper of eager futile comforting. Blake stared open-mouthed, his face greenish and flabby, the stern jaw loose, the keen eyes bulging. Mark Robertson was still frowning perplexedly at Van Dyke.

"Don't you understand?" pleaded the latter.

"No, I don't," returned Mark. "What have the two phone calls to my home got to do with—?"

"Suppose the second call were not a mistake—?" hesitated Van Dyke.

Robertson's face went purple. The big veins near his temples swelled grotesquely. He took an involuntary step toward Van Dyke. The latter raised a protesting hand.

"Mark," he said, flinching not at all before the bloodshot fury in the husband's little eyes, "we are here as lawyers, making an investigation. At last we have struck the right trail. I am sorry it leads where it does. I—"

He got no further. At a stride Robertson was beside his wife. Roughly brushing aside Wanda's embracing arms he caught Grace by the shoulder and held her.

"You hear what this man insinuates?" he cried thickly. "I don't ask you to foul your lips by denying it. I'll attend to him later. But give me the right to do that by telling the Woman's name at once."

"Grace!" croaked Blake, his throat sanded with a horror that he would not confess, "don't you hear what they're saying, girl?"

In his harsh eagerness, Mark forcibly lifted his wife's bent head and forced her eyes to meet his.

"What the matter?" he demanded sharply. "Why

don't you speak? Tell Van Dyke he lies. Tell him he *lies,* I say! *Oh!"*

His fierce appeal broke off in a cry of pain. He had at last raised her face and had read it. For the briefest moment he stood stupefied, expressionless. Then, cautiously, half-cringingly, as if expecting a blow, he moved back to Van Dyke.

"Why, Grace!" expostulated Blake, in pitiful bravado. "You're crazy! You don't know what you're implying—what you're letting them think. I won't believe it. Not a word of it. It's a trick to—to—"

She caught his shaking hand and murmured a broken incoherent syllable or two amid the passion of her sobs.

"Almighty!"

Blake's legs gave way and he sprawled inert into a chair, his head on his breast. He had all at once grown old—very, *very* old. Meantime, Robertson had forced his own dazed brain back into a semblance of its former strong control.

"Van Dyke," he said as calmly as if he were giving a routine order, "you will have every trace of

this story destroyed to-night. It must never get beyond this room. I can count on you?"

"Certainly," agreed Van Dyke with equal coolness.

There was no hint in his voice or in his manner that Mark's command entailed the defeat of a bill, the collapse of millions of dollars worth of stocks, a probable panic on Wall Street and the money interests' total if temporary loss of power in congress. For the moment, the great corporation lawyer chanced to be also a man. Something of this Robertson seemed to feel as their hands met in the brief tight clasp of reticent men who dread a show of emotion.

On his way from the room, Van Dyke paused beside Blake's chair.

"Jim," he said hesitatingly, "I'm going over to the Capitol. Shall I tell Mullins to let the bill come to a vote?"

"Yes," answered Blake, without stirring or so much as looking up.

"Yes," he said again, and his voice was dead. "Yes—I'm—I'm licked."

Van Dyke looked down at the sunken head, the drooping shoulders; and he was nearer to pity than his New York masters could have dreamed. Suddenly awkward, abashed, the lawyer made his way from the room. Passing Robertson, he hesitated again, with a vague idea of consolation.

"Mark, old man," he began. "This is terrible. I—"

"Please go," said Robertson, without seeing the outstretched hand or noting the wistful inflection in the dry voice.

As Van Dyke opened the door, Wanda made as though to follow him.

"If you don't need me any further, Mr. Blake," she said gently, "I'll go."

Blake lifted a palsied hand in negation.

"In there," he muttered, pointing toward the door that led to the inner rooms. "I must speak to you—afterward."

When the old man raised his eyes, Mark and Grace alone were left in the room with him. Robertson was standing moveless, unseeing. Grace's sobs broke the tense silence, as she fought weakly for

self-control. Blake crossed over to her. She rose at his approach.

"Daughter," said Blake, almost timidly, "they've all gone. None of them will tell. But there's one thing we've got to know. I'm with you, no matter what you've done. But—but—tell me—that—that this was all over and—and done with—before you married Mark!"

"Father!"

The Woman faced him in dry-eyed horror. Every trace of weeping was seared away by the flame of sudden indignation. And, at the sight, Jim Blake gave a great wordless cry and gathered her into his arms as though she were a baby.

"Oh, my little girl!" he choked, "Dad's own, *own* little girl! We've been tearing your poor heart to pieces and your old father was the bitterest against you. It's all right, I tell you, girl. It's all right. Dad'll see you through. You shan't be bothered. There, there! Oh, don't cry like that, darling. *Don't!"*

His voice grew husky. Leaving her abruptly, he crossed to Robertson.

"Mark," he faltered, avoiding his son-in-law's eye, "you promised to protect her. This is the time to do it. It was 'for better, for worse'. If that vow is any good at all, it's as good for 'worse' as for 'better'. Mark—be gentle with her, boy."

He seemed about to say more. But, glancing furtively at Mark's set changeless face, he forebore.

Slowly, with bent shoulders and dragging step Blake made his way to the big room's farthest end. There, in the window's embrasure, out of ear-shot, his back to the others, he halted.

Drawing aside the curtains he glanced out into the night. The gloom of the sleeping city was below and around him. But, in one black mass, tiers upon tiers of garish lights glowed. There, in the Capitol, the Mullins bill was coming to a vote. There, Matthew Standish, freed by a miracle from the toils that craftier men had woven about him, was winning the victory which was to clear for him the pathway to the very summit of political power.

There, too, the cunningly wrought power of Jim Blake was falling to pieces, unhindered—the power that years of toiling, of planning, of waiting, of

conscienceless master-strokes had welded so strongly. It was forever disintegrating. And with that power—though only for the moment, since wrong must thrive while earth endures—the mighty and intricate machine was lapsing into its helpless component parts.

Blake realized it all. But just then the knowledge carried no hurt. The spectacle of the downfall was blurred for him by the mist of a Woman's tears. Its crash and the yells of the conquered were less poignant to his ears than was the echo of a Woman's heart-wrecked sobbing.

"I'm licked," he told himself; trying thus to recite his last bitterest lesson.

But the words meant nothing to him. And he tried again to make clear the situation to his own stunned senses.

"It's gone," he forced himself to say, half aloud. "Everything's gone, for me: Washington—the crowd that would have followed me to hell—and that *have*—all the gaudy careers I mapped out for Mark and Tom. The organization—the dandiest graft that ever came to any man. It's *gone*. And

Jim Blake's a dead one forever and ever. And then some."

But he found his subconscious self straying from the picture he was so ruthlessly drawing. His mind would not fix itself on the lighted Capitol and the wreck of his life-work; but crept ever back into the dim room behind him. Even his tongue tricked him. For when he would have made it recite further the tale of his losses, it muttered brokenly:

"My own little girl! Dad's own, *own* little girl!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HOUR OF RECKONING

MARK ROBERTSON and his wife, left alone, together, in the other end of the great library, faced the situation for which Grace had so long been preparing and for which her frightened years of preparation had proved so useless.

He knew. That was all. And no word of hers could gloss over or make bearable the truth. Wherefore she spoke no word, but stood looking at him; taking in every detail of the stout figure and the strong commonplace face as though she wished to carry with her forever their memory.

Mark strove for speech. But for the first time in his roughly aggressive career, suitable words were denied him. Alternately he longed to tell her in naked terms what she was and how utterly he despised her. Again, a gush of self-pity urged him to reproach her for the wrecking of his ideals, the blast-

ing of his happiness. Vanity coming part way to his aid, he framed—and left unspoken—a curt sentence of farewell. And, in the end, all he could say was:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

It was not what he had intended to say. It was banal. It expressed none of the stark moods that seethed in him. Yet as she did not answer, he found himself asking once more:

"Why didn't you tell me?"

And now, unknown and unwished for, there crept into his bald question a note that was almost of entreaty. And at the sound, the dumb devil that had locked Grace's lips departed.

"Tell you?" she echoed. "Oh, if you knew how I've wanted to!"

"Then—"

"I didn't dare. I didn't dare."

"Truth and honor surely—"

"Your love meant more to me than truth and honor. I sacrificed them to keep it. I would sacrifice them and everything else to get it back. Is that shameless? Perhaps. The truth usually is. If I had

told you, you would never have forgiven me. You know you wouldn't. If I've wronged you—"

"If?" he burst forth, in a gust of wrath. *"If* you have wronged me? Can you doubt it? Every day and every year my faith and trust and love have grown; until they became my whole life. My world and my religion were *you.* And you have let me go on that way until there was nothing else for me. Then in a breath you wipe it all away. *Wronged* me? If you had told me at the very first, I could have killed my love without killing myself. I would still have had my ambition, my political hopes. But now, when I lose you I lose everything."

"Do you lose more than I? Do you lose half as much? It was my happiness I was fighting for. I loved you so, Mark. I think, when a woman's *real* love begins, her life begins, too. And everything that went before seems a nightmare and unreal. When I found you loved me, I couldn't let you go. Then, the more utterly I loved you, the more I wanted to clear away every shadow between us and tell you everything. I couldn't, dear. Even though the longing grew to be torture. By that time it

wasn't just a question of my own selfish happiness. It was for your sake—for your happiness—too. You must believe that."

"My happiness? You have guarded it well! You talk much about loving me. If you had really loved me, your love would have made you honest with me. Love that leads a man into a fool's paradise and then to a hell like this, goes by an uglier name—"

"Mark!"

"If you had loved me as a true woman loves, you would have told me. You would have had to. You could not have deceived me like this. Love doesn't feed on lies. It was my right to know everything, so that I could decide my own course. Instead, you have led me into this trap. There is no escape now. And it is too late to reproach you or to try to make you realize what you have done. You say your love for me kept you from telling? Believe that, if it is any comfort to you. I—"

"You are right. We can neither of us see the other's point of view. But yours is the accepted idea and mine is not. Why waste breath in arguing?

You will do what you and the world think right. Divorce me, if you will. I'll make no defense."

"What good would divorce do?" asked Robertson miserably. "I could leave you, of course. But you'd still be my wife. Always and always. The one woman in the whole wretched world. Divorce? Divorce is for people who never loved. Not for people whose love has died."

"You say I don't know what true love is," she laughed bitterly. "I'm afraid I can never learn it from *you*. So your love has died? Love can't die, any more than God can die. You have never loved me."

"I—"

"Never. I see now that you didn't. For you don't know what love means. I lived for you. Every thought and word and act of mine was shaped for you. And for you alone. I knew you. I knew your faults, your follies, your brute savagery. And I loved you for them as well as for the good that was in you. But what was it *you* loved? The woman you married—or a snow-white saintly reputation? If you cared only for the reputation—that is gone for-

ever. But if you loved *me*—the woman I *am*—then I've been everything you thought I was and wanted me to be—ever since the first moment you had the right to think of me at all. I gave you my life, from that time on and forever. And it has been all yours. Before then, it was *mine.*"

"And yet you let me believe it was everything—your whole life—your first love."

"It was. All that was worth the giving. All that had ever been worth the giving. It was my *self.* Oh, can't you see that a woman's body and heart and soul belong not to her first lover but to her first *love?* No woman can even guess what love is until she has found it. And I found it only when I knew you. I gave you everything. I—Oh," she broke off, her vehemence changing all at once to utter weariness, "what's the use of trying to explain to you? We're speaking different languages, you and I. You were eager a while ago to make Wanda Kelly and—that—that man take their medicine, as you called it. Yet *they* were innocent. Why should I expect that you'll deal less brutally with me who am *not?* In my case you have tenfold more reason to be merci-

less. For your vanity is hurt. And a hurt to the vanity is always infinitely harder to bear than a blow on the bare heart. That is why husbands and wives can forgive each other every crime except infidelity. They can't pardon a loved one for the mortal insult of preferring anybody else. Go ahead and do whatever you will. I won't make it harder for us both by whining for mercy. Jim Blake's daughter ought to take her medicine at least as pluckily as a phone girl."

"Grace," he interposed, jarred by her forced indifference and by a strain of hardness he had never before found in her. "Don't make it—"

"I'm trying to make it easy. We've never had a real quarrel, you and I, Mark. So don't let us wind up our married life with one, now. You are in the right. I am hopelessly in the wrong. I have cheated you. I admit it, and I'll accept the consequences. It is in the blood. There is much in heredity. My father is a—politician. I don't know who my grandfather was. And if he had been worth knowing about, I'd know. There is a bad strain running through the family. It cropped out in *me*. Yes, I

have cheated you. You had the right to demand in our bargain the hard-and-fast terms the world has decreed: *all* of a wife's life in exchange for a frayed and battered remnant of her husband's. I can't meet those terms, though I tried to fool you into believing I could. So I must meekly give up the love whose price I can't pay. Don't let's make it harder by having a scene over it. Good night. I'll stay with father until you can decide just what you want to do and on what basis we're to separate. If it would do any good to ask your forgiveness I'd ask it. That's all. Good night, Mark."

She held out her hand with a shy wistfulness. He was staring straight into her tortured eyes and did not see the gesture. The hand dropped back limply to her side, and she moved to rejoin Blake.

But at the first step, Mark barred her way. She looked at him in tired wonder. His face was set and hard. He made no move to touch her. His voice, when he spoke, grated like a file, as he forced it between his unwilling lips.

"Grace," he began, "I've told you my love is dead. And I lied when I said it. I planned to put you out

of my life. And, even while I planned, I knew I couldn't do it. It doesn't matter what I want to do or what I ought to do. Out of all this hideous tangle, blazes forth just one thing that I *must* do, whether I want to or not. I must go on loving you with all my strength and life."

"Mark! Don't! You can't mean—"

"I love you," he went on dully, stubbornly, as if stating some bitter truth. "I love you. There is nothing but that—anywhere. I love you. And my love is a million times stronger than I am. It doesn't matter what you are or what you have done. I love you. When one looks truth straight in the eyes, it isn't logic or right or wrong or good or bad that counts. It is love. And I love you. Any man would tell me I'm talking like a fool. I should have said so myself an hour ago. But I see now it is the only true wisdom that ever was wrung from my smug, blind, self-satisfied brain."

"Do you mean," she panted wildly, "do you mean that you can—that you will—"

"I mean," he cried, brokenly, his self-control smashing to atoms under the hammer blows of his

heart, "I mean there is nothing in all this world for me, dear love, away from *you!* I love you. And I can't go on without you. You are earth and Heaven and hell to me. I love you. And I have forgotten everything but that. Girl of my heart, will you let me make *you* forget, too? Oh, I love you! I *love* you!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE VICTOR?

"THEY didn't seem exactly to be hankering after my society in there," observed Wanda Kelly, "so I came back."

Jim Blake turned from the window at sound of the telephone girl's purposely raised voice. Just within the threshold from the inner rooms of the suite, Wanda, with elaborate care, was shutting the door behind her.

Blake glanced quickly about the room.

"Yes," said Wanda, answering the question in his look and jerking her pretty head back in the direction of the rooms she had just quitted. "In there. I wouldn't worry if I were you."

Jim Blake's grim face took on a light as incongruous as the play of sunset rays on a mummy. The mask of age and defeat seemed to melt beneath it. He took an eager step toward the inner room.

"Just a minute," Wanda halted him. "You asked me to wait. If you don't need me here any longer—"

"Yes," hesitated Blake, trouble flitting across the new light in his eyes. "I wanted to ask you—to—not to let Tom know about this. His sister—"

"I'll never tell him," she promised. "I sent him away so he wouldn't find out."

"You're white, clear through," grudgingly admitted Blake. "Will you do one thing more?"

"What?"

"Bring him back to me."

"If I meet him again," she assented primly, "I'll send—"

"I didn't say 'send'," corrected Blake, "I said 'bring'."

"That's different. I—"

"I'm out of politics. My own game has broken me at last. I'm old. I know it now. I never did till to-night. I'm old and I want my children around me."

"I'll tell Tom," she agreed, softened despite herself by the new suppliance in a voice that had never before been turned to the uses of entreaty. "I'll tell

him. I'm sure he'll come back to you—when he understands. Good night, Mr. Blake."

"There's another thing," he broke in roughly, staying her departure, "a thing that isn't easy to say."

"Then, why say it?"

"Because," he growled, "like all things that aren't easy to say, it's a thing that's got to be said. Miss Kelly, hasn't to-night pretty nearly squared the old debt between you and me? You and yours have suffered a lot at my hands. But, after what's happened here this evening, I guess you'll admit, as far as suffering goes, you haven't got much on *me*. Haven't I paid? Won't you say we're square?"

"We're—we're square, Mr. Blake," she returned in a tone she could not make wholly steady nor impersonal.

"And," pursued Blake, "and—Tom?"

"That's different, too," she faltered. "I—"

The jangle of the telephone interrupted her. Blake, who was beside the desk, picked up the instrument.

"Hello," he called into the transmitter. "Yes—

yes—she's here. Who wants her? Oh! Yes, put him on this wire."

He lowered the telephone.

"Some one to speak to you, Miss Kelly," he reported.

Mechanically, she took up the receiver, and, by long habit, her voice took its professional drone:

"Hello!" she called.

Then, turning on Blake, in surprise, she cried:

"Why, it's *Tom!*"

"Yes," drawled Blake. "So I gathered from the name. I'm glad. Glad, clear down to the ground. For both of you. Tell him so, won't you?"

* * * * * * * *

The winter sun was butting its way over the eastern sky-line. The dawn was bitter-cold, mercilessly clear.

And into the track of the first white glittering rays walked a tired man. A man who that night had won a mighty victory. A victory that foreshadowed the richest gifts his country could bestow. Before him the future stretched bright as that win-

ter's dawn. As dazzlingly brilliant, and as cold and starkly empty.

In Matthew Standish's ears, as he returned toward the loveless abode that he hated to call home, still rang echoes of the pandemonium that had broken loose in the house when the Mullins bill had gone down to defeat. His arms still ached from the pump-handling a host of shrieking admirers had forced on him.

There was a memory of tossing glee-distorted faces turned upward to him as to an adored leader. Raucous voices had screamed his name in every variant of crazy adulation.

He was the Conqueror. The Man of the Hour. The Champion of the People. The Saint George who had overwhelmed the dragon of corruption, and had set a captive nation free. He was the next speaker—the next president—anything that you may choose.

And he was exhausted, sick to the soul, hopelessly miserable. For years he had worked steadily toward this hour of crass triumph. And now its taste was salt and ashes between his teeth.

THE VICTOR?

He had crushed his enemies. And within him his heart was heavy as lead for their shame.

He had won—what? He had been strong and had overcome. To what end?

To know that the price of strength is loneliness. To know that corruption can never wholly die. To know that God will let Satan live until the Judgment Day. To lift for a little moment his country from the mire in which, within a few years at most, it must again wallow, helpless.

"There is only one lasting victory," he muttered disjointedly to himself, as he moved onward in the dazzling ice-cold track of light. "At the last, it won't be the world's applause that the world's great men will remember. It will be the love smile of a Woman. And—I shall never have known that memory. What is the rest worth?"

THE END

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